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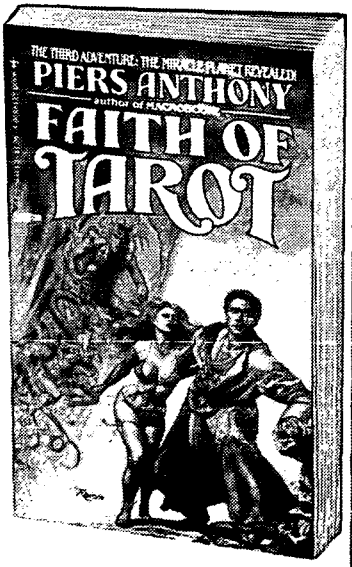

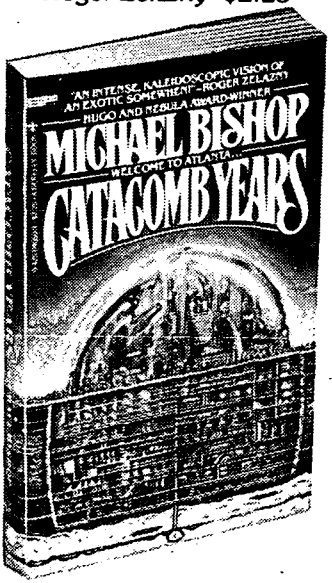
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In his recent stories for F&SF, Hilbert Schenck has proved that the sea can be as exotic and adventurous a location for an sf story as deepest space. Mr. Schenck is director of the ocean engineering program at the University of Rhode Island and has spent years looking at underwater accidents and preparing reports for the U.S. Department of Commerce. From this experience he has developed the thrilling and authentic story you are about to read: about a submarine bottomed at 940 feet and a most unusual rescue attempt. Mr. Schenck has a new novel, AT THE EYE OF THE OCEAN, coming out soon from Simon & Schuster.

Buoyant Ascent

BY

HILBERT SCHENCK

The phone rang steadily in the dark bedroom and Molly Kaplan blearily brought her wristwatch dial close to a sticky eye. "Jesus, three thirty!" She waited, knowing it was a wrong number. Yet the damn thing kept going. "Shit!" She fumbled for the receiver in the dark, got it, reversed it twice, and finally managed a "Yeah?"

"Dr. Israel Kaplan, please. Cmdr. B.J. Smith calling, U.S. Navy."

Molly could hardly believe it. "Listen, buster, it's three-fucking-thirty in the morning!" she shouted in the general direction of the receiver.

A pause. "I understand that ... is it Mrs. Kaplan? ... but we have a very urgent emergency. I certainly wouldn't call you at this time for any other reason."

Molly, her temper thinning steadily, leaned over and flicked on the bedside light. A soft yet handsome woman in her late forties, she managed to squeeze her bowed, full lips into a fearsomely thin line as she stared at the silent form of her husband.

Izzy Kaplan was not, in fact, asleep, but he had convinced himself that a position of utter passivity coupled with an absolute minimum of respiratory activity would see him through whatever was stirring up his wife.

"Izzy!" shouted Molly, now running at full volume. "It's the fucking

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Navy with some kind of super emergency for you. What the hell are you doing with them now? What's going on?"

Kaplan abandoned his fake-sleep plan and gently lifted his head. "Tell them I don't make house calls," he croaked.

His wife was now sitting up on her side of the large bed, her breasts jutting out the Providence Medical College T-shirt she wore as a nightie. "What are you up to, Izzy?" she said more quietly but far more ominously. "You swore you'd never take another dime from those bastards! And after the way they went for you... What *is* your price, anyway, Izzy?"

There was no bypassing this, Izzy Kaplan finally realized. He would have to sit up, deal with his wife, deal with the Navy, deal with a fatigue so great that he wished he could simply faint. He rolled over and pushed back the covers, a small, naked, wiry man, almost sixty but trim and muscular. His large face was that of a hawk: a beaky nose, deep, inset eyes that peered bright ... not now but most of the time, and thin white hair that grew more bushy as you went back. "Molly," he said softly, "I haven't had a professional word with a Navy person for two years."

Molly looked at her husband with total suspicion. "Right! And they just happened to pick your name out of the phone book as a hyperbaric specialist, I suppose? By God, if I find you're making a laughing stock of me by sneaking around doing dirty Navy business.... I'll...."

Kaplan, who a few moments ago could only imagine sinking into total blankness, found himself suddenly energized by these totally unjustified acusations. "Yes!" he snarled, sitting up and facing Molly. "You'd just love to go and bitch with those bull-dykes in your group about Izzy Kaplan's latest sell-out!"

"You can't call my friends that, Izzy!" shouted his wife in a sudden rage. "By God, you'd fuck any one of them, you goat, and you know damn well you would!"

"Not likely!" shouted Izzy right

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back. "Before I'd screw one of those cows, I'd cut it off!"

His wife pulled off her T-shirt in a single motion and cupped her, actually quite lovely, breasts in two hands. "Moooo...." she said in a cold and ominous voice.

Kaplan, realizing he was at some sort of abyss, smiled lopsidedly at Molly. "Hey, Mol, I didn't mean that. If you want me to screw your buddies, why I'll just oblige any old time."

Molly softened a bit but her lips were still tight against her teeth. She looked downwards, away from Izzy's face. "Yes," she said with some sarcasm. "I imagine you could. Look at you. You're as big as a house now!"

That final accusation almost broke Kaplan's spirit. He spread his palms in a hopeless jesture. "Hey, Mol ... I got to pee..."

"Agggh!" Molly lobbed the phone receiver at Izzy's head but he managed to catch it and put it under his chin.

"Yeah? Doc Kaplan here."

Cmdr. Smith, who had heard most of this quite clearly, found himself once again, briefly, without words. "Ah ... well ... ah ... sorry to get you up doctor. It's just that ah, well ... we've got a bottomed submarine, an SSN-47 class in about nine hundred and forty feet. We're talking with them now. They lost thirty crew in the accident, apparently a valve jam, some flooding, plus interlock and warning circuit failures. There are seventy-one people left, and they have access to most of the boat." Cmdr. Smith's flat, young, Midwestern voice paused, waiting for some response.

Izzy Kaplan thought about the depth and shook his head. "New London is down the road, commander," he said stiffly. "Why me?"

Cmdr. Smith, driven by a ringing sense of the passage of time, forgot the bull shit advice fed him by the public-relations people and spoke quietly. "Dr. Kaplan, obviously we wouldn't call you on this if we could possibly help it. You know that. I know that. I'm not going to argue about what you said two years ago or what you think of us now. The situation is simply this: The captain was killed in the accident. Command has devolved to the exec, a Cmdr. Jason Ferguson, one of your students in the Environmental Medical Program at Providence Medical. Ferguson forwarded to Washington a year ago a complete emergency plan for conserving life support on a bottomed SSN-47 class, a plan he had done as a project in your course. That plan is now under implementation on the boat."

Izzy Kaplan stared at the phone. His student, Jase Ferguson, in command of this? He spoke again into the receiver. "What do you want from me, commander?"

"According to Ferguson, they project a little over six days before they have to put on the emergency breathing apparatus and ramp the boat pressure. Getting them at that point is

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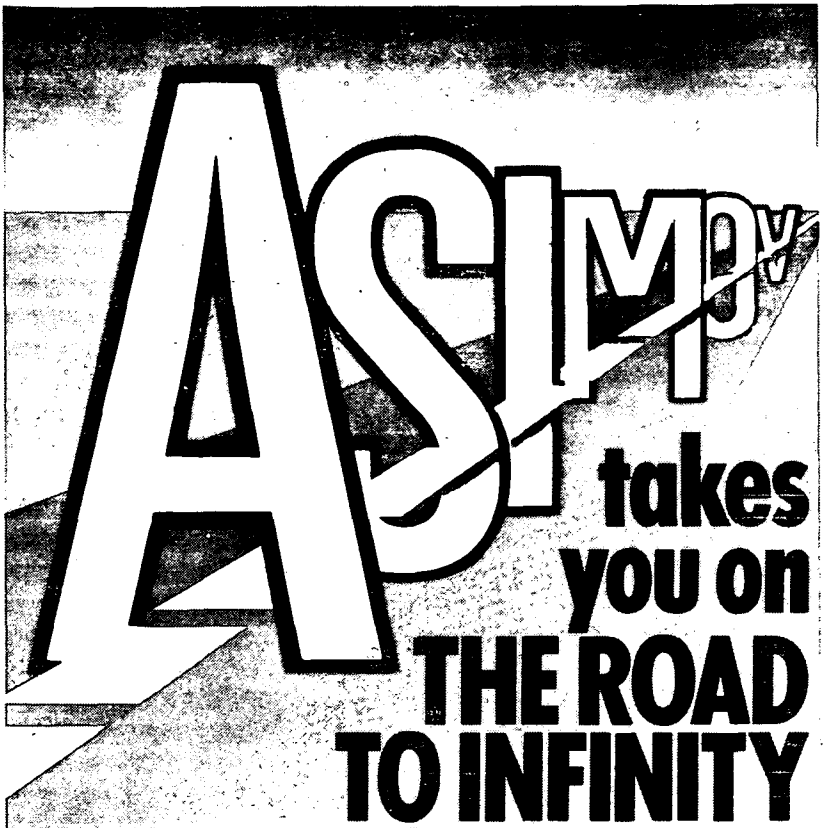

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DOUBLEDAY

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probably not possible. Our catamaran mother-vessel, USS *Tringa* was off Norfolk, and she's already on the site putting down anchors. The DSRV team in San Diego is loading up to come east. Frankly, Dr. Kaplan, what we want you for is to keep track of the life-support optimization with Ferguson, following his plan. Adm. Kincaid feels that you'll understand each other better since you worked on the plan together in your course."

Kaplan sighed. Kincaid was an old enemy indeed. "If I come, commander," said Kaplan firmly, "I'm not just coming to OK Ferguson's calculations from the sub. I'm part of the rescue operation and I'm to be included in all discussion of operations, decisions, and input to and from the sub."

Now it was Smith who sighed. "Doctor, there are seventy-one of them. Jesus, you wrote the book! You interviewed the *S-4* people, the rescue sailors, the old Congressmen. You know what losing these folks would mean. If you have a way of getting them up ... hell, believe me ... Adm. Kincaid is going to listen!"

But Izzy Kaplan had lived shrewdly almost sixty years, and this passionate plea in the face of a dangerous and unknown future only proved that a thirsting man will say anything for a drink. "I accept your assurances, Cmdr. Smith, with the understanding that if I'm not fully taken into the operation, I won't participate."

"Of course, of course," said Smith hurriedly. "Now we're staging part of the operation out of Quonset. If you could get there by six this morning, we'll have a Coast Guard copter going out. The *Eadie* lies on the lower edge of the continental shelf, east of Long Island."

"The *Eadie*, that's the sub's name?"

"The *Thomas Eadie*. You know, that Navy diver who got the Congressional Medal...."

Izzy nodded. "For saving Fred Michels when they tried to get air into the *S-4* off Provincetown in 1928.... Well, commander, it really is all coming together with this one, isn't it?"

As it turned out, Molly decided not to waste Izzy's awakened condition on a bathroom trip so that it was some-twenty hot, active, disheveled minutes before he managed to dress and get started for his office at Providence Medical.

A November wind carried fits of rain across the black, empty streets, but there was little strength in it. The Physiology Building was mostly dark as he fumbled his keys into various doors that led to his sanctum. In the midst of this mass of books, reprints, instruments, and things having no evident use whatever, sat Peter Sledjewski, one of his engineering students. The boy's feet were comfortably up on Izzy's messy desk, and he pensively lipped a beer can, staring at a small black and white TV.

Peter looked around as Izzy unlocked the door, grinned widely at his

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professor, and said in a sing-song voice, "I know where you're going."

"It's on the news then?" asked Izzy.

"Is it? They've been showing cuts of the *S-4* and the *Squalus* for an hour. They even woke up one of the future widows for an interview." As he spoke, a still photograph of Thomas Eadie posed formally in his chief's uniform, his medal hanging about his neck, stared sternly and unblinkingly out of the TV at them, dissolving to a movie of the launch of the *Eadie* at Groton five years back.

Izzy shrugged and pulled open a bulging file drawer. "My student, Jase Ferguson, is in command of this mess," said Izzy quickly. "Got to find that paper he wrote on life-support extension in his sub." As his fingers closed on the thick document, filed under the heading of 'Navy Fuck-ups,' Peter Sledjewski spoke in a serious voice.

"Prof. They must be really desperate to call you up, don't you think?"

Izzy turned. "Jason is my student, after all, and he did write the air-conservation drill in my course."

"Prof, how long do you think they have?"

"The Boy Scout on the phone said six days. They want me to fine-tune it with Jason to maximize everything."

Peter Sledjewski looked directly at Izzy. "The most you could squeeze out of that is a few hours, one way or another, right?"

Izzy shrugged again. "Probably not that. With their usual dumb luck, they've got the best man in the fleet in charge. I doubt that I can show Jase a thing."

"So," said Peter. "They've got a problem. It's tight. So tight that they called you up, so tight they're willing to give you a piece of the thing in spite of everything that's gone before."

Izzy, Jason's paper in his hand, sat down in the student chair across from his desk. He ran a hand roughly over his broad, wrinkled forehead. "You know, Peter, if you weren't so hog-lazy, you'd be one hell of a student."

Peter looked over his shoe tops at Izzy. "You're thinking the same thing about the DSRV that I am, right, prof?"

Izzy nodded, his eyes hooded. "The *Eadie* bottomed on an angle. The rescue sub can't mate up with her trunk."

Peter nodded and popped a new can. "Prof, four years ago after the blizzard they had C5-A's and Starlifters coming into Green Airport no sweat. You know god-damned well that if the exercise was routine, they'd have a DSRV into Green by now. Hell, they've got two of them out in San Diego."

Izzy kept nodding. He was partly talking to himself. "Sure they would! But at a high angle, they wouldn't dare bring one East until they tried it out on a sister ship at Diego, in the harbor. What are they saying on the TV?"

Peter shrugged and took a long pull on his beer. "The usual nothing-shit.

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The deep submergence rescue vehicle is preparing for its daring mission. Crews are assembling. Just PR crap. Prof?" Izzy nodded. "Could they make buoyant ascents ... with the Seibe-Gorman suits?"

Izzy shook his head. "Not from over nine-hundred feet. That system is redlined at six hundred."

"They wouldn't just sit there and smother, prof. Jason would try it, you know he would!"

"Jason loves the Navy and the flag, Peter. He might wait too long. And what if the first ones don't make it? He couldn't keep sending them up. Jesus Christ!" Izzy rubbed his cheeks. "I'm going out there to watch a fucking disaster! I mean the *S-4* was fifty years back when I wrote it up. Forty to the *Squalus*. But to live through one of these...."

The TV played music quietly and they sat listening for a moment to the patter of rain on the windows. Kaplan stood up and shoved the report into his overnight bag with his mini-calculator. "Are you a janitor or a night watchman?" he said to Peter suddenly.

"Both," said Peter. "Can't you tell?"

"Then why in hell don't you get those dust balls that are rolling around and sticking to my pants?" said Izzy pointing at his filthy floor.

"Prof," said Peter winking, "if you get those guys up, I'll sweep up the dust balls. I'll even shelve your journals!"

Driving south down the interstate, Izzy Kaplan could now think of nothing but a high-speed ascent in the water column; the head back in the suit, the gas gushing up the throat, the continuous surge and snap and ripple of the fabric from the tremendous velocity drag. But the throat was the key. Form a tube. Think of forming a tube! The rain pattered steadily on the windows and the slick, black road curved smoothly, almost empty in the glare of the street lights.

Turning east for Quonset, Izzy considered the exit circle of error on the sea surface. How large would the arrival-location uncertainty be? Nine hundred and forty-feet times what angle? If they had to draw the rescue vessels back too far, an embolized escapee might die before they got him out of the water and into a decompression chamber. That data must exist, thought Izzy, at least for some six-hundred-footers. We can extrapolate it.

The venerable Quonset Air Station had long since been abandoned by the Navy, a victim of the old Nixon southern strategy plus a liking by admirals for sun-belt locations. Indeed, one of the least offensive comments Izzy had made on his still-unforgotten TV, prime-time talk-show appearance had been a suggestion that in any fleet actions, the citizen would be safest on a U.S. vessel. "For," Izzy had said, "the Soviets are clearly spending their efforts on Arctic warfare, and with our

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ships mainly off San Juan and the Virgin Islands, there's no way they could even find each other, much less fight."

The empty buildings of Quonset passed on either side as Izzy headed for the water, but there was light and activity ahead, and as he turned past the black, bulky cube of a jet-test cell, he suddenly came upon two flood lit SeaCrane helicopters loading pallets into their capacious innards. Izzy parked his car out of the way and jogged through showers to a hangar door where a rain-coated officer stood with his clipboard and lists.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Kaplan. Cmdr. Smith said I could get transportation here to *Tringa*."

The officer nodded. "The Coast Guard is doing our passenger shuttle. They're due back in about a half an hour. Doctor, why don't you get some coffee in the hanger while you wait?"

Izzy was glad to do that at five thirty in the morning and he managed to get down three cups of the hot, sweet stuff before a big twin-rotor machine settled down into the floodlit area and disgorged two officers who immediately whirled away in a staff car.

The officer now stood at the open side-door of the machine and shouted against the engine noise into the red-lit interior. "We've only got one passenger on this trip, a Dr. Kaplan." The white-coveralled figure inside, his face unseen behind a full-protection mask, handed down another flying suit.

"It's cold as a witch's tit in this thing. Tell the doctor to put on a suit."

Kaplan pulled the bulky, padded garment over his overcoat, then awkwardly climbed the ladder into the copter's cabin. The crew moved like white slugs in the chill, red glow, hoisting aboard and storing small packages and bags. Izzy took one of the eight seats in the center of the fuselage and stared out a small oval window. A SeaCrane was lifting off ponderously, the officer waving in the nasty dawn. Now their rotors began to hiss and up they went, the lighted patch of Quonset growing smaller as the rain beat against the machine. Then they were clear up through the clouds and the rain was gone. A thin November sun spread its faintest warmth through a high cirrus layer, and beneath them lay unbroken cloud cover out over the Atlantic. Izzy suddenly wondered about the weather forecasts. What sea state could they come up into? Nobody knew that; it depended on the surface operation. At that velocity, it shouldn't matter until they tried to get them out of the water.

The machine bored steadily eastward out over the shelf, then finally began a descent, striking the cloud layer again at about two thousand feet. They went down through it rapidly, the rain again beating on the windows, and now Izzy looked out and saw the fleet of vessels that clustered together in this patch of ocean. Dominating it all was USS *Tringa*, the gigantic, cata-

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maran mother-vessel. Almost seven hundred feet long and half as wide, *Tringa* lay to a double moor, rolling sullenly in the long swells. As they came in over her stern, Izzy could see a nuclear boat nestled between the huge hulls, only a needle-thin stern showing. This would be a sister vessel to the *Eadie*, on hand to answer questions of method and fit and trial that arose on *Eadie* as the rescue progressed. In the dawn semidarkness, the stern landing pad on *Tringa* was starkly lit by floodlights. But the true center of the stage was almost empty, a huge circle of water, fitfully searchlighted by three destroyers and another, small mother-vessel. At its exact center a ™Day-Glow-orange buoy rose and fell on the long, dark seas. Izzy stared at the tiny bobbing speck of color and again imagined a bulky, suited figure surging upward, faster and faster. Izzy put his head back and opened his mouth. He imagined his throat was a steel pipe, rock-solid, as the air whooshed out. He exhaled with a gasping shriek, pushing as hard as he could just as the copter touched down like a feather on *Tringa's* deck.

Fits of rain blew across the deck, for the wind was stronger out here. Still, the long roll of the huge catamaran was easy enough, and Izzy, shrugging out of his coverall and handing it back up into the red inferno of the copter, looked around for an exit off the deck. Two figures came up and waved, lifting their rain hats briefly so that Izzy could recognize them. "Capt. Gold...Mary. Nice to see you both," said Izzy as they approached.

Immanuel Gold, a careerist M.D. in charge of the minuscule Hyperbaric Medicine branch of the Navy, was no great friend of Izzy, but the short, fat man knew there was too much on the line at this point to worry about grudges. "Dr. Kaplan, we're delighted to have you on the team. Let's go get some breakfast."

But as he spoke, a seaman appeared at his elbow and spoke in his ear. "Oh, sorry folks," said Dr. Gold, "We're bringing out two extra decompression chambers and there's some problem with the specs. Look, Mary, you take Dr. Kaplan to breakfast and we'll meet at the briefing."

As Gold dashed off, Izzy turned to the tall angular woman whose broad horsy smile was almost hidden behind a watch cap. "Well, Mary, this is quite a gathering of the clan!"

They pushed into a warm, lighted companionway, doffed their rain coats and stepped along the dry corridor. Surgeon-Commander Mary Jackson strode purposefully ahead, her broad shoulders turning slightly to pass through the oval doorways. After much walking foreward they turned into officer's country, set off by a curtain of royal green, and then further to the senior officers' dining room, an amenity that *Tringa* was amply large enough to justify.

Seated at a pleasant polished-maple

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table and ordering from a menu, they smiled at each other while the young waiter took their orders. As he left, Izzy cocked an eye. "So how are they doing down there, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "So far they seem to be right on target as far as life-support usage. Energy is up but they're really working on that. Apparently it takes quite a while just to shut everything off."

"And how do those seventy-one guys feel about it?"

Mary smiled. "Well, Izzy, there are actually sixty-seven guys and four women."

Izzy put down his fork and stared. "So? Four girls? That's why you're here, Mary? I didn't know they took women on patrol."

Mary laughed a single bark. "You don't read the newspapers, Izzy. Really! They've been trying it on three boats the last six months. But you're right. I'm here because there isn't a single top-rank female in hyperbarics in the U.S."

Izzy sighed. "Perhaps we can buy one from Canada?"

"If you did," said Mary icily, "then Canada would have nobody."

Izzy chewed on a crispy fried egg. "So they must be thinking of a buoyant ascent, Mary?"

Mary shrugged her large shoulders and folded her Norwegian-sweatered arms across a wide, flat chest. "They claim to think of all the contingencies, Izzy, but they like the DSRV better."

Izzy leaned forward and spoke in a lower voice. "The *Eadie* is leaning over, isn't it Mary?"

She nodded. "About fifty degrees, and then down by the bow." She paused, then: "They're building a trunk to adapt DSRV to the *Eadie's* exit. They've inclined a sister ship in San Diego and they're going to try a hook-up."

"When?"

Mary shook her head. "I don't know, Izzy. It's very hard for us to find out about DSRV. I'm here on the buoyant ascent contingency. They've ... well, they obviously have a problem because the press output on DSRV has been tremendously vague..."

"Mary, have they made any start on testing the Seibe-Gorman escape suits at nine hundred and forty feet?"

"Not that I know of. But in all fairness, Izzy, they only got this tub anchored three hours ago. Also, there's a team coming with a CURV IV vehicle which they claim can lead an air and power line to the *Eadie* and hook it in.

Izzy shook his head violently. "Jesus, Mary! What happens if the weather deteriorates? They couldn't possibly remain on station pumping air into the boat. It'll be another *S-4!* The Navy runs for Provincetown while seventy-one of them smother. Furthermore, they can't keep power-scrubbing forever down there without renewing the bath by heating. Can they send that kind of juice down?"

Mary shrugged again. "That's all in the future, Izzy."

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Izzy dropped his voice another notch. "Mary, Kincaid is not very smart and he's a bastard besides. The DSRV cost over a billion dollars plus unlimited overruns in the research phase, and the Navy Department is desperate to use it. Kincaid knows damn well that if the suit ascent is proven safe, public pressure will be wound tight to bring them up. Instead of waiting around while the engineers diddle with DSRV and CURV to gimmick the impossible, the crew will be ashore and riding down Fifth Avenue in a parade that will make Lindberg's thing a third-rate Bar Mitzva. And the DSRV establishment gets an investigation instead of medals!" Izzy's voice grew fierce and Mary looked at him evenly.

"Izzy," she said carefully. "Shouting and abuse are not going to get those people up."

Izzy sat back shaking his head. "You're dead wrong, Mary! Shouting is the only thing that *will* get them up! I can feel it."

But as they walked aft to the main wardroom, Izzy's assurance began to fade. "You know, Mary, I don't know a goddamn thing about the respiration physiology of women. Like, how does their airway resistance compare? And lung structure? Do they have a greater or lesser propensity for blebs and weak alveoli? How about their soft palate and tongue? Jesus...."

Mary turned and grinned at her shorter companion. "Chauvinist pig!" she said as brightly and cheerfully as she could.

But her attempt at humor failed to restore Izzy, and she heard him mumbling to himself as they stepped into the big wardroom. "I knew this was going to be a guilt and inadequacy trip."

The main wardroom of *Tringa* stretched spaciously between the bows of her twin hulls. Half the compartment was now segregated by chairs and divans into a seminar area, with large screens and blackboards up front and various projectors and computer terminals at the back. As Izzy and Mary found seats, the room slowly filled with important-looking older men, about half of them in uniform.

"Look!" hissed Izzy. "There's the fool Spurling from Duke. Too bad he didn't bring one of his dogs. We could use the mutt to try out an escape suit!"

Izzy nudged Mary again. "They really are digging deep! Here comes Doktor-Professor Reinhart, chief shrink from Menninger and his entourage. Talk about the blind leading the seers! What'll you bet we get a lecture on the *Eadie* as a primordial womb in the belly of Mother Sea...."

"Hush, Izzy!" whispered Mary sharply. "You'll be making enemies soon enough. At least do it in an organized way!"

Adm. Kincaid and several officers finally strode into the wardroom and the conversations died away. Kincaid

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was a tall white-haired man, distinguished in his waspy way, his face a mask of cold reserve. But Izzy, watching him closely, saw this stone face was brittle at best. Kincaid was grinding his molars. He was further out of his depth in this than the rest of them, what with the political problems added on to the simple requirements of rescue. However cleverly he worked it out, losing all or a major part of the *Eadie's* crew would total his career, whereas failure to use the DSRV could have the same effect. For the briefest of moments, Izzy had a sense of his old enemy's inner state.

Now they sat staring at an enlisted man chalking data on a blackboard while Adm. Kincaid explained the present life-support situation on the *Eadie*.

Izzy Kaplan inserted a card in his programmable computer and punched in the numbers from the blackboard, hit several more instructions and read the glowing result. Kincaid had about finished when Izzy put up his hand. "Admiral, the data shows an exponential CO-two rise instead of a ramp. Shouldn't we get Jason on the phone about this?"

A civilian in front nodded vigorously, looking at a similar display on a similar machine. "He's right, admiral. That last data-set projects exponential with only five chances in a hundred doubt."

"Thank you, Dr. Kaplan," said Kincaid stiffly. "We'll call the *Eadie*," and he nodded at a chief communications specialist at a portable switchboard panel. Two quiet minutes later they heard,

"Cmdr. Ferguson here."

Izzy suddenly jumped up and stepped quickly to the panel, squatting next to the mike. "Jase, it's Doc Kaplan. How are you doing, old buddy?"

"Prof! Hey, great to hear you!"

The metallic voice borne from the depths on a twenty-thousand Hertz carrier still expressed delight. Mary watched Adm. Kincaid's patrician old face turn sour with distaste. How they hated Izzy, and how they hated to have him here.

"Listen, Jase, your last data-set shows an exponential on the carbon dioxide."

"I noticed that, prof. We're drawing samples from several parts of the boat, and with everyone in bed, we've got some local anomalies. I just finished a volume-average of our spaces and we're still on a ramp."

"Now what about the power drain, Jase? What's it going to do to the scrubbing?"

A pause. "Prof, we've got to have some damaged cells, and the high angle may be a problem with the batteries too. There's no other explanation. You know, following the plan I doped a year ago, we should wait for four-point-two percent CO-two before starting the scrubber, but now I've rederived the diff equations to include a

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nonlinear battery loss term. Instead of a single, big scrub, like we worked out in my report, I figure to turn the bad cells on at two-point-four percent and use them completely up, then ramp again and see how we're doing with the other battery bank. Of course if our high angle causes problems there, we'll have to reanalyze."

The wardroom was very quiet. Izzy turned in wonder. "Did you hear that, Mary? He deriving and solving differential equations down there!" He turned back to the mike. "Keep your notes, Jase; we'll work this up into a dissertation when you get up. Jase, did you factor in the higher crew CO-two output with increased percent?"

"Sure, prof. That just makes it all the more essential to go scrubbing soon. I just wish we had better scrubber-efficiency curves at high CO-two. I put that in the report but they never got around to running the tests."

Izzy looked around the wardroom again and wrinkled his nose. The room remained very still. "Jase, I just don't know about your women in case of a buoyant ascent. Have you got somebody up here thinking about their throat and lung parameters?"

Cmdr. Ferguson laughed suddenly. "Prof, I've been reading about them in the NASA bioastronautics book. It's got a whole new section on women's physiology. Actually, they're much better than we are, prof. Smaller soft palates and tongues. Since their lungs are slightly smaller and weigh the same, they probably have better web strength. Furthermore," went on the voice, "they have a more favorable airway L-over-D and a slightly higher peak exhale pressure."

"Right!" said Izzy loudly. "That's how come they can scream so loud."

Dr. Mary Jackson noticed with disgust that even Kincaid smiled at this crack. She got up from her chair and walked over to the panel, bracing instinctively as *Tringa* took an especially deep roll to port.

"Well," said Ferguson, undeterred, "if we go to buoyant ascents, I'm planning to send a woman first, Jo Ann Spinolto our first-class yeoman. She fits the NASA specs to a T and she's a scuba nut with an instructor's rating."

But Izzy got no chance for comment, for now Mary Jackson leaned over the mike and spoke in a firm voice. "Cmdr. Ferguson, you've made a correct choice. This is Cmdr. Mary Jackson of the Canadian Navy. It's well-established that women can withstand most diving stress better than men. Don't let Izzy joke you out of it."

Jason Ferguson's reply was prompt and firm. "I've got seventy volunteers for the first slot, Cmdr. Jackson. The decision is entirely mine. Prof? Any more thoughts about us right now?"

Izzy shrugged. "You're way ahead of me, Jase. Play it the way you're going, thinking it through at each step."

"OK. Let me talk to Capt. Stroudley, if he's there. I want his ideas on our battery problems."

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Stroudley, the hard-faced young skipper of the *Eadie's* sister ship now nestled between *Tringa's* hulls, took a chair at the panel and slipped on a headphone set, entering immediately into a quiet, tense and prolonged discussion with Jason Ferguson.

I don't like it, thought Izzy. Got to do it now. Can't wait a second. "Admiral," he said loudly. "If the buoyant ascent option is needed, we have to know how the escape suits work from the greater depth. I request permission to arrange with Henri Bettencourt of CISMAR to try the suit on an ascent dummy at their Scottish facility."

Kincaid stared across the room at Izzy. "There are several contingencies we intend to try before that desperate measure, Dr. Kaplan," he said coolly.

"I'm not suggesting we bring them up that way now, admiral. I'm urging that we discover at once if that route is feasible. Time is critical. Even Henri may take two days or more to set the test up. We must...."

Kincaid lost his temper. "Look, mister. You're not here to tell us about ascents! I'll decide that question. There are plenty of problems for you just keeping them alive!"

Izzy stood up and strode for the door. "Nuts, admiral! Jason will keep them alive longer than I can ... or you can. You people will live through a public shit-storm if Jason has to make outside ascents without proper preparations. I'll be damned if I want any association with that kind of decision, especially when there's still time to find out!"

He stalked out of the wardroom, then stopped out of their sight in the corridor to take some deep breaths. He let his anger cool a bit, although not too much. Kincaid would eventually have to come to Izzy's position, but there was no time to wait for that. Something about the way Jason spoke of the energy problems on the *Eadie* disturbed Izzy. Time was unrolling steadily and choice narrowed with each passing second.

"Ah, excuse me, son?"

The white hat stopped at attention in front of Izzy. "Yessir?"

"Where can I make a long-distance phone call to Rhode Island?"

The sailor led Izzy over tortuous paths through *Tringa's* innards to the main communication spaces. There, Izzy identified a lieutenant in charge and introduced himself. "Got away at three-thirty this morning, lieutenant. Wonder if I could make a phone call to my wife?"

The lieutenant winked. "You bet, doctor. Kind of left her in a rush, huh?"

He showed Izzy to a small booth, took the number, and in a minute the phone rang. Izzy picked it up. "Hullo."

"Senator Briggs office. Miss Marley speaking."

"This is Izzy Kaplan, Miss Marley. Is my wife there?"

"Just a moment Dr. Kaplan ... Sir? She's on another phone. She wonders

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if you could call back?"

"Tell my wife," said Izzy, his voice going up a notch in both volume and frequency, "That I'm calling from a naval vessel anchored over the *Eadie* and that there's nothing she is doing more important than what I have to tell her."

A minute passed, then he heard Molly's low, hard voice. "Yeah, Izzy?"

Izzy wondered if anyone else was listening. He leaned forward. "Turn on your tape machine, Molly, so there's no misunderstandings later. Now, the *Eadie* is leaning over and that means...." Quickly he explained the technical and political problems. "...so I want you to get the senator. Now. At once! Tell him that he's got to call Kincaid and ask why they haven't started tests on the escape suits at the greater depth. We may not have six days, Mol."

Molly snorted. "You mean those bastards are risking their own people's lives so they can justify the DSRV, Izzy?"

"Well sort of, Mol. Kincaid will come to testing suits, but maybe not for a day or two. I'm worried about...."

"So why in Hell should you or I or the senator save these bastards from their own stupidity?"

"You bitch!" said Izzy suddenly. Then more quietly again: "Forget the fucking politics and peace shit. There's seventy-one of them. For God's sake, Molly...."

"Why should the senator get involved in this anyway, Izzy?" Molly's cold voice bored in. "It sounds like Kincaid and his friends may wind up buried in crap, no matter what. Thad Briggs would never get mousetrapped into this kind of meddling. Who knows which way it will cut?"

Izzy paused and blinked. "Molly," he said grimly, "they have four women on the boat. Jason figures to send one of them up first. Think about what that means for your damned ERA!"

"Bullshit, Izzy. By that reasoning, they ought to make an Ama diver the prime minister of Japan."

"YOU FUCKING CUNT!" Izzy cried out in sudden helplessness, and at the top of his lungs. So loudly, in fact, that all speech in *Tringa's* big central radio room suddenly stopped and two dozen faces swiveled to peer at the small booth in one corner.

"Now listen carefully, Molly, because this is all authentic stuff." Izzy's voice was now far colder and more acid than his wife's. "You call ole buddy Thad Briggs as soon as I hang up and you tell him to get Kincaid on the horn and give him the message I gave you. Otherwise, you tell ole Thaddeus that I, Doctor Israel Kaplan, will name him as an adulterer and a fornicator of my wife, a man who pumps and plows his executive assistant — who also happens to be a director of the National Rights for Women Committee — in his office, in the cars he rides in, probably in the

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Senate subway, and anywhere else that ole Thad's ole pecker gets perky. Is this all coming in clearly, Mol?"

A pause. Then in a surprisingly mild, almost soft voice, Molly answered. "We agreed not to talk about that, Izzy."

Izzy clenched his teeth. "That was before the *Eadie* bottomed, you whore!"

"I'll call him," said Molly in an even voice. "Good-by, Izzy."

Izzy Kaplan sat slumped and rubbed his eyes for a while, thinking of other ways he might have done that, feeling nauseated and sick from the violence he had used on his wife.

Izzy opened the door to his booth and found the entire communications watch of *Tringa* staring at him. The young lieutenant walked over grinning from ear to ear.

"Doctor," he said, "I surely admire a man who can talk to his wife like that. Why..." He shook his head. "If I ever...."

Suddenly, Izzy grinned back. "My wife can throw a phone a Hell of a distance, lieutenant, but not from Rhode Island to out here."

The young man shook his head. "Yeah, but you got to face the music sometime. Oooeee! My wife doesn't let me even use words like that any more. Says they degrade women and sex. All that stuff...."

"Ah, well," said Izzy briskly, "just tell her that old couplet about sticks and stones. Look, lieutenant, I've got a more complicated call to make. To Henri Bettencourt, Compagnie Internationale Sousmarin in Scotland. Their number is Lochstrom 624. I've got to find out the status of their ascent dummies in case Adm. Kincaid decides to test the buoyant-ascent escape suits."

The chief communications specialist stared at Izzy, then at the lieutenant. "Lochstrom 624 is a phone number?" he asked in disbelief.

Izzy nodded. "That's the UK number. Actually there are probably fifteen digits but you'll have to call London Information to get the dialing code."

Izzy looked at his watch. Henri should be getting ready to leave his lab. He would just have to work through the night to move this along.

In a few minutes the chief gave a sharp whistle from across the room, and when Izzy looked up, he grinned and pointed to the booth. Izzy sat down and lifted the receiver.

"Henri? Henri Bettencourt?"

"Izzy, my friend! How fine to hear your voice! And from the submarine tender. How is it going with the *Eadie*, Izzy?"

"Okay, okay, Henri, but there are problems with the Seibe-Gorman suits...." And Izzy quickly explained the need for test.... "So, Henri, do you have an ascent dummy we could use for a field trial? I know you can manage that depth at Lochstrom."

"Absolutely, Izzy," said Henri

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Bettencourt. "Jacques, our best one, is fully instrumented now. We can get you lung pressures, suit pressures, velocity, acceleration, gas flows, all sorts of things, Izzy."

"Super, Henri. Listen, could you kind of get going on this from your end? Communication from here is complicated. You should call Capt. Ben Virsig at ONR-London first and tell him to get moving with Seibe-Gorman to obtain identical suits to those on the *Eadie*. These are Mark II's, but there may have been small changes within the Mark. They'll have all the serial numbers down in Somerset. Then you or Virsig can get going to find suits for test. Maybe a sub at Holy Loch could help. Hey, haven't you got some buddies at Holy Loch, Henri?"

"A few, Izzy," said Henri. "We can hold the dummy on a platform for launch, Izzy, but do you think we should try to mount a trunk and launch from inside?"

"Well, if you can get a trunk and get it mounted, sure. But that sounds complicated. I don't think we should delay for it."

"As you said," answered Henri, "I do have a few friends at the submarine base and I would think obtaining a few welders for this task should not be difficult."

"Wonderful, Henri. Anything else?"

"Izzy," Henri coughed discreetly. "We will, eventually I assume, get some sort of authorization, purchase order, or at least communication from the more....ah...official naval sources on this matter?"

Izzy looked at his watch and considered. "Within two hours, Henri, unless I've completely screwed this up," he said.

Izzy felt better after his talk with Henri Bettencourt, and he chatted with the lieutenant and several other radio staff about buoyant ascents and the problem of getting the expanding air out of the lungs fast enough. He explained how the dummy would measure the inner and outer pressures and tell them if a danger of a lung blowout, or embolism, would occur.

"But aren't people different?" asked the officer immediately.

Izzy lifted his eyebrows. "Jacques, the dummy, has adjustments so he can simulate various throat or lung situations, like a too-big or swollen tongue, for instance."

"Kin you put tits on it?" said a very young sailor brightly.

Everyone turned to stare in disgust at the perpetrator of this mindless question, but Izzy only grinned at the boy. "You mean because there are four women on the *Eadie*?"

"Sure!" said the youngster, not a bit chastened. "They got to come up too. God, you couldn't leave them down there, doc!"

"Everything suggests they'll have an easier time than the men. Women have generally greater respiratory toughness," said Izzy. "So if Jacques

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says it's OK, we'll figure we can pop Jacqueline up too.

The lieutenant shook his head. "Damn. Wait till my wife hears that! The thing is, doctor, if the wimmen are so damned wonderful and smart, why aren't they rich?"

"They are," said Izzy quietly. "Who do you think holds all the stocks, disposes of all the trusts...."

At that point a young ensign appeared, as if by magic, at Izzy's elbow. "Excuse me, Dr. Kaplan, but Adm. Kincaid would like to see you."

Izzy looked at his watch. Molly had pulled it all together in twenty-six minutes.

In the privacy of his office, deep in officers' country, Kincaid was coldly furious. "There's a real problem finding anyone to work with you, Dr. Kaplan, considering your hostility to the Navy. However, since Sen. Briggs is a senior member of Armed Services, we are constrained to cooperate with him on the matter, and that means with you as well. I might say I bitterly resent your...."

"Admiral, let's agree that we both want them up safe and let the rest of the bullshit lie." Izzy looked at Capt. Gold who stood in embarrassed silence next to the admiral. "Will Manny set things up at ONR-London and Lochstrom, admiral?"

Kincaid nodded grimly. "Capt. Gold has instructions to offer you every assistance."

"Let's go to your place, Manny," said Izzy and they left Kincaid at once.

"I don't mind working with you, Izzy," said Gold softly, hurrying along after the short, half-jogging Izzy.

"Listen, Manny," said Izzy. "Henri and I will get you the biggest medal they give to desk types. Even Kincaid might wind up with a good-conduct stripe."

They turned into Gold's more spartan office and Izzy began rattling off orders. "You verify direct to ONR-London about finding duplicate suits. I've started that. I need transportation to Lochstrom. Some kind of courier flight, the faster the better. Henri needs an open purchase order and the Holy Loch O-in-C needs to be unleashed. Although I don't think you could stop them at this point. Now, Manny...."

At sixteen hundred hours, that very same day, Izzy Kaplan stood in a companionway waiting for transport back to Quonset. Throughout the naval establishments in the United Kingdom a series of spasms and pulsations were developing that might eventually turn up escape suits and a way of testing them at nine hundred and forty feet. Only Mary Jackson had come to see Izzy off into the wet, dark, blustery afternoon. Indeed, his tenure on *Tringa* had been so brief that he was hardly missed at the senior officer's dining room that night where various distinguished physiologists and hyperbaric specialists discussed the day's events.

"Mary, if Jason starts them up be-

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fore I get back, you'll go into the tank with the first girl?"

"That's why I came, Izzy."

Izzy shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't have anything to suggest, Mary. You've done it all plenty of times. Ice, oxygen, the electric toys, the thumper. They've got every kind of life-starting widget the mind of man can conceive."

Mary Jackson's eyes narrowed. "Izzy, the first one is the worst. That's the one who shows the rest that it's possible. If he sends up a woman...and she lives...they can't deny us then, Izzy. Those macho bastards!"

"Hey," said Izzy with a wan smile. "You're a Canadian, Mary. Texas is two thousand miles south."

Mary looked at him with a curled lip. "You think it's different up there, Izzy? With the famous Mounties and the lumberjacks and all that other male crap? Why do you think Quebec wants to secede, Izzy? Because those sexist bourgeois French bastards are scared to death we'll show their wives how to live outside of slavery!"

But Izzy was shaking his head harder and harder. "Mary, Mary, we're doctors! Jesus, we took that crappy oath, Mary! Don't load all that politics on her when you get her in the tank. She's ... she's just going to be scared as Hell. Like us, Mary! Hold her hand. Tell her how great she looks ... how the blue of the medal ribbon will set off her eyes. Just keep telling her she's super, Mary!"

Mary suddenly gave Izzy a huge hug, enfolding his head between strong, sweatered arms and a large and slightly undulating breast. "It's going to work, Izzy," she said, her voice cracking, and Izzy, retrieving his head, stood on his toes and gave the tall woman a kiss on the lips as the rhythmic chatter of the descending helicopter echoed flatly off the deck.

Quonset seemed almost back in its palmy days as Izzy's copter slid down through the clouds and popped over the airfield under a five-hundred-foot ceiling. Now there were many Sea-Cranes and other rotor machines parked in front of several hangars, along with truck-trailers and mounds of gear. An entire complex of pressure tanks, cable drums, and boxed equipment represented the CURV device, an unmanned, remote and cable-controlled submarine that could carry cables into the depths. Several white decompression chambers with their cluster of support devices sat on pallets, evidence of the growing possibility of buoyant ascents by seventy-one persons. But still, Izzy noted, no sign of DSRV, the small and expensive rescue sub designed to take men out of bottomed military submarines.

The same officer still mustered his lists and nodded curtly when Izzy came up and introduced himself again. "Your courier pilot will be right here,

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Dr. Kaplan. Why don't you get some coffee while you wait?"

This time Izzy carried his cup back out of the hangar and stood in the drizzle beside the busy lieutenant. When the man looked up from his lists, Izzy pointed across the field to a nearby hangar. "Did I actually see a McCann Bell and kit over there, lieutenant?"

The man whirled on him cursing. "Isn't that the goddamn stupidest thing, doctor! That fucking bell should be in the Smithsonian! I didn't know we had any left. And now it turns up in the middle of this ... with fucking people who can actually run it!"

"It worked beautifully with the *Squalus*," said Izzy mildly.

The officer eyed him narrowly, then grinned. "Yeh, doctor, in 1938, for Jesus sake! There's no way that hatch seal would work at this depth! And besides...." But at this moment a flyer with Marine insignia turned around the corner and walked up to them.

"Hi. I'm Maj. Pangborn, your courier pilot, Dr. Kaplan. We're ready to head for London when you are."

Izzy shook the extended hand. "Now!" he said simply and they walked along the hangar line until they reached a large, two-cockpit jet aircraft parked just off the old Quonset runway turnaround. Maj. Pangborn showed Izzy how to get into his suit and chute pack, how to use the oxygen, and how to piss in the bag. "It's only two hours, doctor, so if you need to crap, do it now," said the major practically.

The acceleration at take-off was impressive, and as they drove skyward at about a sixty-degree angle, Maj. Pangborn in the forward cockpit babbled along at Izzy. "You'll have to brief me on the next leg, doctor. As I understand it, we pick up some of these escape suits at Heathrow and then head for Scotland. I'll have to find a field close to Lochstrom...."

But the jet howled up through the thickening clouds and suddenly broke into the clear upper air where the sun still shone and the trails of great airliners crisscrossed the brilliant blue above them. Up they went inexorably, and Izzy could only blow his breath out completely in a gasp as the hot sun broke blindingly into his cockpit and the acceleration fell away. They rode up over the rim of silence and set off for England.

"Mach two plus, doctor," said the pilot cheerfully.

But all Izzy said was, "It's completely beautiful ... so blue! So immense!"

"Less cramped than submarines," answered Maj. Pangborn. "Of course, things happen faster up here."

Yet it seemed to Izzy that nothing could happen as rapidly in this huge and peaceful space as the sudden, ugly emergencies that always waited hidden in corners of the dark bottoms of the seas.

They came down like a bullet along

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an RAF runway at Heathrow, over the slick black asphalt, turning rapidly into a huge, almost empty hangar and then suddenly sitting still as the engine whine fell away.

Like Rhode Island, it was dark and blustering rain at Heathrow, and Izzy peered out of the hangar wondering whom to phone when lights popped out of the rainy blackness and a Land Rover with Naval seals on the windshield pulled in. Izzy's old ex-friend, Capt. Ben Virsig, USN, jumped out and grabbed Izzy's hand. "The suits are coming, Izzy," said Virsig, an aging, blond, overweight man in black rain gear. "Believe it or not, there were ten to go to the *Eadie* that they replaced, for some reason, and never sent. We found them in a warehouse at Southampton, and I've got my best driver bringing some up. You wanted four?"

Izzy nodded. "The numbers all check, Ben?"

The big man nodded back vigorously. "These four are right out of the middle of the group on the *Eadie*. They should be identical. Come on. I'll take you to dinner in a terminal while we wait for my folks to get here with the suits."

Maj. Pangborn decided to stay with his plane; so Ben and Izzy drove off to the big domestic terminal and an indifferent meal plus several drinks.

Capt. Virsig puffed on a cigarette and looked at Izzy across the table. "Well, Izzy," he said a bit awkwardly. "It's great to be working with you again, especially on something like this. Something this important...."

Izzy nodded. "I know we disagree on things, Ben," he said, "but getting Jason and the rest up is the whole show right now."

Virsig leaned forward, his flushed heavy face puzzled and frowning. "Izzy, why did you say all those things? Why, Izzy? What was to be gained by all that old stuff? All that business about Vietnam and the flyers being yellow and dumping their bombs anywhere? That business about the lack of casualties in the underwater teams....? Jesus, Izzy, you called us all fucking cowards...."

Izzy looked steadily at his old friend. "No. I never called you a coward, Ben. God knows, not you or Jason, not the good ones. Now listen, Ben! I've already completely fucked up my marriage because that spineless shit, whose ass you have to kiss every day, that Kincaid, didn't have the simple guts to tell Washington, 'Fuck off with the DSRV! I'll get the crew up my way and as fast as possible.' So don't give me any bleeding shit about how great you people are and how bravely you killed Dinks. I'll wreck my life to get Jason up, Ben, but I don't have to listen to your whining about the rotten Navy."

Ben Virsig puffed harder on his cigarette, took a drink, and looked Izzy in the eye. "Bullshit, Izzy. You've got your alter ego in Jason on the sub, and you're going to do the thing ex-

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pected of famous and Pulitzer Prize historians, namely pull off the next historic rescue yourself, completely and totally, and naturally write it up."

Izzy sat back and grinned. "I figured Henri would say that, Ben, but I'm glad it was you. Now think about it? Is that what's happening? I'm too close into it, Ben. If DSRV or CURV can do it safely, then, Jesus, that's got to be the way."

Captain Virsig signaled for another round of drinks and drummed thoughtfully on the table. "No, Izzy, we hate to say it, but you're probably right. The battery drain is getting worse on the *Eadie* as it gets colder inside. The weather's blowing up, and CURV has a sea-state limitation. There's still a stability-problem with DSRV carrying the trunk, plus a half-knot current in that area down near the bottom that they just discovered."

Virsig puffed harder and harder, then stamped out the butt. "No ... you were right to call Sen. Briggs, Izzy. The faster we test, the better! But let me say this, Izzy. There are as many shits out of the Navy as in. You know Briggs, Izzy, and the crowd he runs with. You say you aren't kissing Briggs' ... or someone else's ass, Izzy? I say you're a liar. And who do you think pays the bills for your beloved Henri Bettencourt? Exxon, BP, Mobil Offshore, and various lovely Arabs who still behead people. Great lovers of freedom, sweetie! You're better off in a sub, especially now that we give you women along with the great chow."

Izzy shook his head and spoke seriously. "Ben, how do you think I'd do as a commune doctor in Israel?"

Capt. Virsig grinned. "You mean with khaki short-shorts, hairy legs, and followed by a flock of midwives...."

"And a Sten gun in my black bag," said Izzy quickly.

Virsig shook his head. "They don't use Stens anymore. I don't know if you could get an AK-16 into a black doctor's bag."

"The Hell with it then," said Izzy. "Ben, is somebody thinking about plucking them out of the water after the ascent ... in say, sea-state eight or nine?"

"You bet somebodies are thinking about it, Izzy," said Virsig. "Look, that's the kind of dumb systems thing we're good at. You and Henri do the suit bit, the single-human bit, and we'll do the getting-them-out-of-the-water bit."

Captain Virsig sat back and rubbed his flushed face. "I don't know why I talk like that, Izzy. None of those things are bits. None! Good people are going to be hurt, maybe killed trying to do them. They're not little or bit-sized things at all."

"Oh, they'll seem small enough by the time our society gets through with them, Ben," said Izzy sourly. "In the end, you have to look at it professionally...." but Izzy remembered with a wrench that he had called his wife a

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whore over this professional matter, and he fell silent.

The Land Rover from Southhampton had arrived and a chief was showing Maj. Pangborn one of the suits as Ben and Izzy arrived back from dinner. Izzy stared at the huge, TMDay-Glow-orange suit with its small face-window and various fitments, then shook his head. "One size fits all, Ben. That girl will disappear in the folds of that thing."

"She probably outweighs you, Izzy," said Virsig. "How are we doing, major? Found a field?"

"A good one," said Pangborn. "Forty miles from Lockstrom. I called Holy Loch and they'll have a couple of Land Rovers waiting for us. Might as well get into our suits again, Dr. Kaplan."

As he pulled on the coveralls, Izzy looked at Ben Virsig. "Ben, can you work out the transmission to the *Eadie* so we can tell them direct what we're finding?"

Virsig nodded. "There's a Cmdr. Finch at Holy Loch. He's at Lochstrom now with a mobile microwave shooter. He'll aim directly at USS *Baleen* at Holy Loch, who will transmit via our secret and absolutely reliable means, namely satellites, to *Tringa* and thence to the *Eadie*. We'll all be waiting, Izzy."

At that moment, around the corner of the hanger ran a mob of perhaps twenty young people in long hair, unisex jeans, and hefting gyro-stabilized minicams and tiny, intense spotlights that sent wild shadows flickering inside the hangar. They instantly surrounded Izzy and Virsig and began firing questions.

"Clear out, you bastards!" screamed Izzy. "I'm flying to Scotland! There's no time for this!"

"Dr. Kaplan!" shouted the tallest, leather-jacketed camera-hefter. "Why are these tests necessary? Shouldn't the sailors be coming up now before the weather gets worse?"

Izzy whirled on him, and the next morning, all over the Western world, people watched a small Jew, half-dressed in a bulky flying suit, shake his fist at them from the screen. "You bleeping bleeps!" they saw him shout. "Do you know what bleeping nine-hundred feet of pressure is like? Do you? When those people get in that chamber, they're going to be taken to that bleeping depth in less than thirty seconds! It's like a bleeping hammer stroke ... you understand ... a hammer stroke! Everything has to absolutely bleeping work, you bleeping...."

Men looked at their wives that morning and said in wonder, "Didja hear that? Like a hammer stroke he said...." But by evening, of course, there would be still newer wonders to catch their interest.

At the hanger, a group of hard-running shore patrolmen and bobbies cleared out the TV crews, and soon they were off the runway and climbing up into the blue air again. Izzy drows-

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ed on the brief trip to Scotland, but woke up as Maj. Pangborn felt his way down into a pitch-black, raining Scottish night, if anything worse than Rhode Island or London, and careened along a short, lumpy runway with a terrifying scream of full-reversed thrust.

By the time Izzy arrived at Lochstrom in a bumping Land Rover, it was three a.m. Scottish time and just about nineteen hours since the phone had rung in his Providence bedroom. Suave, tall, mustachioed Henri Bettencourt, Managing Director of Compaigne Internationale Sousmarin, met them in the steady downpour, took one look at Izzy's face and hustled him into a small bedroom off his lab space. "Izzy, we have some hours yet preparing Jacques for his first ascent. Do you want food or just sleep?"

"Sleep, Henri," said Izzy softly, pulling off his coat and kicking off his shoes. He fell onto the bed, and Henri Bettencourt stood looking down at Izzy as the small, older man pulled the blanket up to his chin and mumbled, "It's getting cold on the *Eadie*, Henri. We must bring them up soon...." and was asleep in a moment.

Through some statistical miracle of weather, Scotland, early that November morning, was gorgeous. The storm had left interesting clouds that the still-hidden sun caught and tinted pink over the low dark-green hills around the stark, shadowed blue of the deep loch. The low concrete buildings of CISMAR unobtrusively hugged one corner of Lochstrom's shore, but much of the research establishment was underwater, staged at various depths down into the deepest regions of the loch. In these underwater labs trained the famous eight-hundred-meter teams of CISMAR, the only commercial firm in the world to work regularly below this depth in the open ocean with non-armored divers. Within a huge, low, heated shed lay the rows of chambers in which trainee or medically treated divers spent days returning from the high pressures of the Loch bottom. Or even some continental shelf, for CISMAR, using their own Starlifter, often brought decompressing divers back to Scotland for observation or further training while they waited out their time in the tank. This was saturation diving carried to its final conclusion, in which groups of men moved about the world doing their work but living in a totally alien, pressurized environment, completely apart from their fellows.

Izzy looked around at the beautiful morning, took a deep breath of cold, totally fresh Scottish air, and shook his head admiringly. "Henri," he said, "you're loaded with more goodies than ever. You must be coining money!"

Henri smiled down at Izzy. "When they come to us, Izzy, they have tried everything else. Like your oil-fire man, Red Adair, we are cheap, even though their lawyers scream at us. Saturation below eight hundred meters, with no

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work or danger bonus, costs eighteen hundred dollars a day, per saturated man, plus about the same again in support wages. It adds up rapidly, Izzy."

"You must have a nice overhead pack, Henri. You sure didn't buy this with green stamps!" said Izzy while Henri smiled.

Trucks, large and small, were parked down by the main pier, and suddenly one of them gave a series of sharp honks. "Ah. They are ready to dress Jacques and submerge the trunk. We will have an ascent within the hour, Izzy."

"Less than a day to this, Henri," Izzy sighed. "No wonder you guys are rich. I could never organize anything like this."

Henri put his arm around Izzy's shoulders. "Each does his own part. You fly around the world shouting at people, and I sit here like a mother hen on my white decompressing eggs."

CISMAR had a classy water-jet maneuverable pier shaped like a huge plastic articulated snake. Henri expertly steered this out into the loch with Izzy gripping the rail until they reached the main test platform. On this steel bed, and dwarfed by it, was a horizontal cylinder just large enough for a man to stand inside at its center, and sticking out of its top was a second, thinner cylinder about ten feet high with axis about fifty degrees off the vertical.

"We welded a spare escape chamber from Holy Loch into a standard transfer tank," said Henri pointing upward. "I decided to match the angle of the *Eadie*, so everything would be as correct as possible."

"How did you get this done so fast, Henri?" asked Izzy in astonishment.

"Ah, before and while you slept, Izzy, every first-class welder from Holy Loch and Lochstrom managed to fit into the job. My only problem was finding things for everyone to do."

A young French engineer, ducking his head, came out of the horizontal chamber's exit and waved at Izzy. "Dr. Kaplan, Hello! Any choice on which of the four suits, sir?"

"You pick," said Izzy cheerfully. "While I pray."

Jacques, the dummy, lay on his back next to the chambers. He was dressed in proper U.S. Navy blue dungarees and had bare feet. On his dark, high, quite-distinguished forehead some sailor had scrawled in chalk, "I want a raise!"

Henri smiled at that. "We will give Jacques a medal instead, Izzy. But we mustn't pin it on him or we'll puncture the nylon."

The three men unfolded an orange suit and then gently lifted Jacques, who was only slightly floppy, into the wide, zippered opening. As soon as the suit was sealed, they handed bulky Jacques into the lower cylinder exit hatch to a technician waiting inside. The young engineer followed the dummy in and waved back at them. "We will put him in the trunk down there, Henri, after we are sure there are no leaks. Dr.

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Kaplan, should this first exit pressurization be a thirty-second cycle?"

"Absolutely," said Izzy quickly. "Let's make it as typical as possible. Henri, is Jacques all ... wound up inside? Ready to go?"

"Jacques is recording right now. The data is going into a tape machine in his stomach, Izzy." Henri turned to shore as the chamber hatch bolts turned shut and made an emphatic downward gesture with his thumbs. Then he led Izzy back on the movable pier and steered them to a small, moored submersible, as the test platform rapidly submerged with hardly a ripple.

"My newest toy, Izzy," said Henri beaming and winking. "A practical diving saucer. We will watch Jacques' great effort and photograph it, although we will not be able to match his upward velocity."

There were two seats in the saucer and a perspex top that dropped over them. As soon as they were settled, Henri turned some switches and the saucer began to sink. "My dear colleagues," said Henri into a microphone fitted near his head, "we begin test one, buoyant ascent, Seibe-Gorman Mark II escape suit. Lights, please."

Instantly the entire water mass of that section of the Loch was illuminated. The water was clear and green, and Izzy could easily see the descending test platform at least a hundred feet below them, but Henri increased their sinkage rate and they soon caught up to it. "Acoustics?" said Henri.

"Here, Henri," came a voice out of a small speaker.

"We will profile the ascent at maximum resolution."

They sank down and down into the green alongside the test platform. Finally they slowed and stopped, the platform showing only the smallest sway as it tugged on the ends of the four thick cables that held it to the bottom.

"Trunk?" said Henri.

"We are putting Jacques in," came the voice. "I have set his head attitude at position B-three; rapid-ascent, optimum-angle. He is set on mean values in all respiratory parameters. We are ready to start."

Henri backed the saucer off the platform that now bulked alone in the green mass. "Commence the exit cycle," said Henri.

"We are counting, Henri. Ten to air start. Nine. Eight..."

They waited tensely.... "Two...One...air on!" Now the engineer read the escape chamber pressures.... "Four hundred...five...six ...seven...eight...nine...equalization!"

Izzy, intently watching the top of the slanted vertical cylinder, saw its hatch slam back and a huge inflated, orange figure fly out, momentarily encased in a giant silver gas bubble. Jacques tore through the top of this bubble, which shattered to a million small ones, as Henri sent the saucer in a sudden upward rush. But Jacques flew far faster ahead of them, an orange giant,

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his suit rippling in waves of fabric, his limbs trailing aimlessly, buffeted by the fluid drag forces.

"Dummy on the surface," came a voice.

"Was that a minute and a half?" said Izzy. "My God, it seemed like nothing! It's so fast, Henri!"

The saucer popped up next to Jacques, now floating comfortably on his back, and Henri lassoed the dummy's foot and slowly towed him to the pier. As they got Jacques up on the pier, Henri and Izzy saw there was now a large crowd of Navy officers and enlisted men standing silent on the shores of Lochstrom watching them. Several men stepped forward to help load Jacques into an electric truck. "We must read Jacques' memory out onto a monitor, gentlemen. We will keep you informed," said Henri briskly.

Henri, with Izzy sitting beside him, drove the silent truck into a low cavernous building and then directly into a small room filled with electronic and video racks. Together they carefully unzipped and removed the suit, leaving Jacques on his back in the truck. Pulling up the dungaree shirt, Henri revealed a neat, multipronged female jack where Jacques' belly button might otherwise have been. Henri unwrapped a cable connected to a tall rack with a typewriter input, dials, switches and a big TV screen, and plugged Jacques in.

Izzy felt his throat constrict. Oh God. Please make it right, he thought. Oh God....

The TV screen flashed green, and two perpendicular lines of numbers appeared forming a graph. "Jacques thinks in the metric system, Izzy, but I'm showing both," said Henri.

Now a red line moved rapidly from the bottom of the screen upward. It bulged to the right, suddenly shot well out, quivered, and finally slid back towards zero as it neared the top of the screen.

"That is lung delta-P," said Henri, his voice low and completely even.

But Izzy barely heard. He was swallowing as quickly as he could to keep from being sick, blind with sudden nausea and panic. "There's a fucking pressure spike, Henri!" he finally managed, his voice a whisper.

Henri pressed some buttons on the keyboard below the monitor, and a slightly curving green line showed from top to bottom on the screen, lying much closer to zero along the pressure axis than the tip of the lung-pressure spike. "That is fifty-percent embolism, based on a normal, infinite population of escapees."

Izzy, suddenly faint, sat down on the floor and put his head back against the cool concrete wall: "What are the chances of losing all of the first three, Henri?" he said softly.

A table now appeared on the TV screen at Henri's touch. "Over fifty percent. Izzy."

Neither spoke for a long minute,

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and to Henri, Izzy seemed to become smaller as he crouched against the wall, drawing up his knees, his hands rubbing and rubbing his large white face. "Henri! I can't tell Jason ... Oh Lord, what will I do, Henri? Oh ... oh...."

But Henri only stared firmly at his friend. "It would be most stupid to tell anything to anyone until we discover the cause. Pull yourself together, Izzy! As your most excellent Pres. Truman said years ago, if you wish to make a souffle, you must be ready for the heat of the stove!" Henri turned back and entered more keyed instructions. The lung delta-P graph reappeared, but superimposed over it were two new curves in blue and yellow. "Now, Izzy, blue is suit pressure and the yellow is lung pressure, with their differece in red. Do you see how the spike in the lung-difference occurs as the suit pressure falls most steeply? Now I will obtain curves of the rate-of-fall of pressure, Izzy," and Henri's fingers danced over the keyboard as Izzy took his hands away from his face and got slowly to his feet.

"Ahhh!" said Henri excitedly. "You see, Izzy! The first derivative of the suit-pressure maximizes at the same depth as the delta-P spike! Now...we will see what the suit gas outflow looks like." And the fingers again flew over the keys. "*Voila!* Izzy! The flow actually decreases at about two hundred meters then...then, you see, Izzy! It also spikes and suit pressure falls precipitously! Now, we will isolate the cause...I will enlarge the grid...Izzy, look! That portion is only five meters full-scale, and we note a ripple in the flow...and the pressure! The air-release flapper valves are oscillating and blocking at the high density!"

And to Izzy's complete astonishment, Henri suddenly flung himself out of his chair and onto the orange suit lying rumpled next to the small truck. For a moment, Izzy thought his friend had funked even worse than himself and was about to pound his head on the floor. Instead, Henri attacked the black plastic gas-relief valve on one shoulder of the Seibe-Gorman suit. He unscrewed the valve assembly and pulled out a four-leaved rubber flapper valve and a floppy spring. Throwing these two items into a basket, Henri looked impatiently at Izzy.

"Come, Izzy, we will take out these flappers. They are causing the difficulty and they are only there to keep water out of the suit on the surface in case of a delay in rescue."

Izzy dropped without a word onto his knees and removed the valve parts from the two ankle units while Henri busily disassembled the remaining torso exhaust valves.

Hurridly they unplugged and dressed Jacques again and, in minutes, were trundling him down in the truck to the water's edge.

The group of Navy people had grown, and standing at their front, his eyes squinting against the bright sun-

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flash off the waters of the loch, stood Vice-Adm. Polder, COMSUBARCTIC, "Pole-Axe" Polder, generally considered the meanest bastard in the service. His heavy beetle-brows were drawn together and his craggy face had the temporary passivity of an approaching line squall.

"Henri, I want to watch Jacques pop out. I'll brief the admiral." said Izzy quietly.

Henri mustered several enlisted men and explained that Jacques should be taken from the loch quickly to prevent water from entering the suit and then his mouth. "For," said Henri smiling, "Jacques can drown just as you or I."

As they watched the platform and diving saucer submerge, Izzy explained to Adm. Polder about the pressure spike in the dummy's lung and the suspect flapper valves. Polder barely nodded, his eyes fixed on the loch.

Once again Henri announced the test and then they heard on the PA system the steps of the air-start and chamber-pressurization cycle. "Eight hundred...nine...equalization!"

Izzy looked at his watch. Waited until almost ninety seconds had passed and looked up. A moment later Jacques popped into the sun, a nosegay of suspended spray about his head, only his legs below the knees still in the water. As he hung for a moment, a tiny rainbow segment appeared in the air behind him and then he fell gently backwards to bob on the placid waters of Lochstrom. The sailors, hot-rodding Henri's pier quickly to the spot, lifted the dummy out of the water and held him upright to let any water drain to his feet. A moment later the diving saucer appeared, and they were soon driving Jacques back to the analysis room, now with Adm. Polder grimly riding on the truck bed next to the dummy.

Izzy rubbed and rubbed his cheeks, thinking...please...please...as they again undressed and plugged in Jacques. The room was silent as Henri typed on the console. The coordinates appeared on the screen, and the red line again moved swiftly upward, but now it was smooth and always-decreasing with no spikes or anomalies of any sort.

Izzy gave a great shout of triumph, and as Henri turned to grin at him, his twirled mustachios bristling, his straight teeth shining in the soft light from the TV screen, Izzy seized his old friend under both arms, lifting him from his chair and hugged Henri as hard as Mary Jackson had hugged him on *Tringa*.

"Oh, thank you, dear Henri! Oh, my dear, dear, Henri!" cried Izzy kissing his friend, first on one cheek, then on the other, crying and laughing, hugging and kissing, until even Pole-Axe Polder took off his hat and stared, blinking, at the label inside, and had to clear his throat several times.

"Dr. Kaplan," rumbled the admiral, "shouldn't we be in touch with the *Eadie* on this?"

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"Absolutely," said Izzy, suddenly dropping Henri back into his chair. "Henri, let's try the other three suits, flappers out, one ascent each, to make sure this one isn't a weirdo!" cried Izzy beaming at them. "While you do that, we'll call Jason! Come on admiral!"

They dashed out into the sun, almost running into Maj. Pangborn who was scanning the scene at the loch with much interest. "Major!" shouted Izzy. "Can we get going in your plane in ten minutes? Can we get a copter to it instead of these damn Land Rovers? Can we go direct to Quonset?" And as the major jogged along with them, dealing with these questions, they came to a parked, semitrailer with a high guyed mast and dish pointing north. Izzy rushed up the steps and banged open the door.

"Cmdr. Finch! Contact the *Eadie!* Quick before they start them up!" he shouted to a short, thin officer who turned in astonishment at the sudden racket.

Soon they were linked with ONR-London, *USS Tringa* and the *Eadie.*

"Jase, Jase! Do you have an escape suit there?"

"In my hands, prof."

"Unscrew the top of a gas-escape valve. There should be a rubber flapper and a spring inside?"

"Check."

"Throw them away. Screw the top back on and do the same to the other five valves..."

"Izzy, this is Ben Virsig. With the flow that much easier, there could be bigger suit-to-suit differences, just due to the way they were folded."

"Henri's testing the second suit now, Ben."

"Capt. Virsig, this is Henri Bettencourt. The second suit shows an almost identical pattern of lung delta-P. We are preparing for number three."

"Did you hear that, Jase? Second suit identical!"

"Wonderful, prof!"

"Cmdr. Ferguson, Mike Polder here. How are things on the *Eadie?*

"Cold, admiral, although lots warmer since you folks called. And our scrubber's gone. The second battery bank had worse damage than the first. We're spreading lithium hydroxide, and I'm estimating thirty-three hours to five percent CO-two. But that assumes we only lose two more degrees of temperature."

"This is Ben Virsig, commander. If you should start ascents, how rapidly can you make your exits?"

"Perhaps ten minutes at first, but we might cut it a bit. We have to close the hatch remotely and then pump her dry. It takes very little juice, but six minutes of time."

"*Tringa?* How about your surface cycle time?"

"Dr. Gold here. We are now at sea-state five to six, prediction of seven or eight by tomorrow morning. We're drilling our recovery swimmers using our own dummies. We believe the *Eadie* cycle will be controlling, but

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we'll have to regulate the departures to insure the area is clear. Mr. Bettencourt?

"Henri, you there?

"Henri, a call for you...."

"Sorry, Dr. Gold, Izzy. We are about to launch Jacques again."

"Mr. Bettencourt, will you give us a statistical summary of the surface exit-circle size when you have completed your tests?"

"Certainly, Dr. Gold. We can test until you achieve the significance level you wish. Local currents should be not important at these velocities."

"Yes, we have the profiles anyway. One more question, Mr. Bettencourt?"

"Yes?"

"What major lung-injury incidence do you project for a sample size of seventy-one?

"Two-point-seven hits, Dr. Gold. But that assumes a random normal population of healthy males. You could have only one, perhaps none.

"Prof?"

"Yeah, Jase."

"Thanks for doing this."

"Thank Henri Bettencourt, Jase. Without his toys and his mind you guys would be popping like balloons."

"Thanks from my crew and myself, Mr. Bettencourt."

"Thank you for the chance to paticipate, commander. Many lives and much treasure will be justified by your escapes. May God bless you, my friend."

* * *

A few minutes later Izzy and Maj. Pangborn were lifting off in Adm. Polder's copter, Henri and the sailors waving beneath them. Thirty minutes later the courier jet was airborne, screaming up into the brilliant Scottish morning, the rolling green and grey hills falling away behind them.

"Kind of a short tour of the UK, Dr. Kaplan," said Maj. Pangborn, "but interesting nontheless."

"Major, you have a future as a-tour guide," said Izzy.

"That fellow Bettencourt," said Pangborn thoughtfully, "unusual business he runs there. Talented, well organized. I guess if I had to do that deep-diving stuff, I'd want him looking after me."

"Henri is a rock, major. Once off Surinam his chief diver suffered cardiac arrest in a transfer bell under pressures. Henri compressed to three-hundred meters in less than two minutes, opened the fellow's chest — Henri is an engineer, not a doctor — and saved him with heart massage. Of course, he had seen it done a few times. He's like ice, major!" Izzy fell silent as they hung, seemingly stationary, under the endless dome of sky.

It was late afternoon when they came over Presque Isle and Maj. Pangborn began his descent to Quonset. Izzy could see below them a part of the sprawling weather system that covered the northeast coast of the U.S., and they went down into blinding rain squalls and buffeting cross winds.

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The long Quonset runway was more than ample for the jet, and Maj. Pangborn rapidly taxied his way past hangers, weaving by equipment piles and finally turning into the same hangar that Izzy had first entered less than two days ago.

The bookkeeping lieutenant, now bolstered by a desk and several yeomen, looked grimly at Izzy. "We're still flying to the *Tringa*, Dr. Kaplan, but I don't know how much longer."

"What's the forecast, lieutenant?"

"Total rotten shit, doctor! One of these three-day northeasters. Thirty to fifty knots, sea state of God knows what!"

"They're liable to cream some of the surface swimmers in that," said Izzy thoughtfully. "Well, that's Gold's and Kincaid's problem."

The copter take-off was rough and scary, and Izzy closed his eyes. Three physician-commanders from Bethesda were also aboard. The Navy was funneling uniformed doctors of every specialty out to *Tringa*.

Izzy turned to the man seated next to him. "What's happening with the press, doctor?" he asked. "I haven't seen a TV in two days."

The man smiled faintly. "Oh, the Navy can either get them up safely or commit collective hara-kiri."

"No middle way, eh?"

"None," said the officer decisively.

The storm had broadened and thickened so much that they flew offshore entirely within it, buffeted and jerked in sickening swoops. Finally they descended and the after deck of *Tringa* suddenly appeared. The cloud ceiling was at a couple of hundred feet and beneath it were the whitecaps and the wildly rolling ships. Even in the brief glimpses before they slammed down on *Tringa's* pad, Izzy could plainly see that an ascent was about to start. The space around the orange submarine-sunk-here buoy was empty, but at the edge of a large circle many small boats rolled and darted. Kincaid had anchored everything he could up to windward to break the wind and seas, the destroyers laying to single anchors rolling almost forty degrees in the steep waves.

But it was the oil that made the real difference. They were leaking it continuously from the windward vessels, and though great waves surged across the ascent area, they never broke, and the general chop and confusion was massively damped by a method used for a thousand years or more and still not understood.

Izzy turned to his companion and grinned. "Want to bet that Kincaid gets handed a citation from the Environmental Protection Agency for dumping all that fish oil out here?"

"Fuck EPA in the ear!" said the man, his face dead white as huge *Tringa* took a vicious corkscrew plunge, then shook herself and came up ten feet in less than a second.

Izzy skittered across the deck, trying to keep the sheets of rain behind

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him. Once inside a companionway, he dashed down ladder after ladder, heading astern and pausing only when an especially bad roll caught him.

Tringa's port hull had a large water-level opening astern, in and out of which smaller boats could move. Along both sides of this open area within the hull waited dozens of men to handle the lines of any boat that might get through the gyrating entrance.

"Dr. Gold! Manny!" shouted Izzy and ran around the back of the space to the other side.

"Manny, have you got any up yet?"

"Ferguson is putting Yeoman Spinolto in the trunk now, Izzy," said Gold, his voice tight.

"Where's Mary Jackson?"

Gold pointed out through the hull opening as *Tringa* rose up on a wave and the escape area went down. Along with the many outboard-powered rubber boats that were hovering around and forming the circle was a larger, landing-type vessel, her front ramp partly down, her bluff stern to the seas, rolling madly. "In the transfer tank, Izzy. The swimmers will bring the escapee right up on that ramp and then we'll retrieve the tank in here. We figure less than forty seconds from exit to pressurization, if it all works."

"Capt. Gold! From Ferguson! She's left the sub!"

Izzy and Gold stared at a tense officer with headphones, then looked out through the big stern opening.

"One minute!" boomed a gigantic amplified voice from *Tringa's* stern, and the many retrieval boats, like runners at a start, pointed their bows toward a common center and began to edge inward.

Jo Ann Spinolto arrived in the glare of the searchlights looking very much like Jacques, and as she fell gracefully over backward, her arms almost horizontal, the two nearest rubber boats roared down upon her. In seconds the water around the floating orange body was alive with black, wet-suited men. In another moment one of the boats, with the orange figure aboard, drove wildly over the humping seas, heading straight for the landing vessel. This now had dropped its bow ramp completely and, instead of slackening speed, the rubber boat leapt right up the ramp, the driver lifting his propeller at the last instant, and disappeared inside the hull as the ramp began to come up.

"Neat, Manny," said Izzy admiringly. "They should give you a big medal for setting that up!"

The driver of the landing vessel paused outside Tringa's entrance, then scooted in as a wave went by. As the craft appeared between the catwalks on either side, line after line spun across, and in moments the entire vessel was pinioned like a fly in a spider's web, *Tringa* roughly jerking her this way and that. While that was happening, a crane hook, ridden by a

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rigger, came rapidly down, and in another moment a small swinging decompression chamber, pimpled by its own gas bottles and gear, disappeared up thorough a hole in the roof of the cavernous space.

"Come on, Izzy!" shouted Dr. Gold. "Let's see how she's doing!"

They dashed up one deck to *Tringa's* medical and decompression spaces, filled chock-a-block with white chambers and hurrying personnel. As they arrived, the little cylinder that had come off the landing vessel was being dollied up to, and mated with, a larger medical chamber. Izzy peered obliquely in one of the large chamber's windows and saw Mary Jackson's large back appear. She was handing in a stretcher on which lay a slim young woman, barefooted and fetching in damp and rather open Navy dungarees. Another doctor handled the rear of the stretcher, and as soon as they were completely in, Izzy seized the microphone at the chamber control station.

"Mary! How is she? It's Izzy!"

Cmdr. Jackson turned to face the window and Izzy instantly knew the answer. Her eyes were like stars of the dawn. Her smile was huge and uncontrolled. Her large, strong body was so alive with joy that Izzy could only clutch Dr. Gold's arm and whisper in delight, "You see, Virginia? There *is* a Santa Claus!"

"She's perfect," came Mary Jackson's proud voice. "The slightest nose bleed in one nostril and not another thing. Ears perfect! Lungs perfect!"

"Can Yeoman Spinolto answer questions?" asked Dr. Gold.

After a moment of interior discussion, a pert round face appeared at Izzy's window. "Hi," said Jo Ann Spinolto. "I feel fine."

Izzy smiled warmly at her. "Sweetie, the TV is just going to love you to death."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I yelled all the way up, Dr. Kaplan. Yelled, *not* screamed!"

"Jo Ann," said Izzy winking. "If you want to scream at my pad, you can do it as much as you want. Or, you can yell too."

"Izzy, stop that!" said Mary Jackson laughing. "Jo Ann, Cmdr. Ferguson has a question."

"Yeoman Spinolto," came the crisp metal voice from the *Eadie*. "Did you strike or catch on anything on the way out of the trunk?"

"No, sir. I went out as slick as a whistle, sir. When the air came on, I felt this intense band of pressure around my head, but of course I was doing my Valsalava Maneuver. Then ... then I was just in the water with this tremendous flapping noise all around and I had my head back and I was yelling and yelling.

"Did you hear that, Jase? She felt that yelling was the best way to clear her lungs."

"Well," said the girl. "It just felt so right. I knew the most dangerous pres-

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sure-increase point was at the surface. So I just tried to increase my yell all the way up."

"Anything else, yeoman? Everyone here is listening to this."

"No. Except that they have a wonderful, speedy way of getting us out of the water. Tell them to just relax."

"Dr. Gold," came Ferguson's voice. "We will send the next man in two minutes, if you are ready, and then one each ten minutes thereafter. We will check on minute eight to be sure the exit area is clear. Is that satisfactory?"

"Chief swimmer?" said Gold.

Over the loudspeaker they heard a calm voice with the gale screaming behind. "Ready at the exit circle, Cmdr. Ferguson, count us to your exit, please."

"One minute fifty, one minute forty...."

Izzy blew a kiss at smiling Jo Ann Spinolto and rushed off with Dr. Gold to watch the next ascent.

As they soon learned, Jo Ann's ascent had been deceptively simple. Few of the *Eadie's* older crew members could withstand this pressurization rate without losing one or both eardrums. They arrived at the surface completly disoriented, vomiting in the suit, and in urgent risk of drowning in vomit even in the brief time it took the swimmers to get them out of the water. As the weather worsened and even the oil failed to completely eliminate breaking seas in the exit area, they attempted to vector the rubber boats more closely, using acoustics and computer projection of the exit point. In spite of this, the eighteenth man virtually drowned in the blood from a gigantic nosebleed when his rescue boat was delayed by overturning in a cross-sea. They kept him going with a breather and chest massage until they could restart him on *Tringa* with electricity, but his brain waves showed he was hurt. Then came a sinus hit of unusual intensity, the sailor screaming so loudly he was clearly audible directly through the walls of his chamber. The desperate attending doctor compressed him to two hundred feet of pressure, then loaded him down with morphine and went into his nose with two distinguished specialists peering in to offer suggestions.

Teeth exploded. Izzy came up to a chamber as an exhausted Capt. Gold peered furiously in the window. "I don't give a shit how much it hurts to drill your teeth. If you go on patrol with a mouth like that again, I'll court-martial your ass!"

The young sailor inside, his jaw aching, sat terrified on a bunk.

"Manny," grinned Izzy fuzzily. "I don't think that's any way to treat one of the all-time heroes of the submarine service."

Dr. Gold sighed and nodded. "Henri Bettencourt was quite explicit about the embolisms, Izzy, but he didn't tell us about all the rest of this."

Incredibly, the first pressure injury

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due to gas bubbles was not a lung embolism but a mild case of itching skin bends that disappeared at sixty feet of recompression. But then an old and overweight chief blew his lungs and died as they tried to get him undressed. Dr. Gold looked at Izzy through droopy, defeated eyes. "We should have had Ferguson send the risky cases first, Izzy, before the seas began to slow up the recovery."

Izzy shook his head. "You couldn't have saved that one, no matter how fast you reeled him in. That was massive bubble damage. You'll find froth in his head instead of blood, Manny."

By early morning they could no longer bring the landing vessels in and out of *Tringa*. So one of them with its ramp down was tied by thick hawsers into the space, and the rubber boats made the trip all the way from pickup to *Tringa*.

At some point an officer from the *Eadie* took a spinal hit and Izzy, Dr. Gold, plus half a dozen other experts were involved with that as the nosebleeds, sinus pops, and eardrums continued to arrive. Sometime later that wild morning, half asleep and holding himself in a chair with both hands as the catamaran jumped and jerked with unceasing violence, Izzy opened his eyes and saw Mary Jackson in front of him.

"Izzy, Izzy! Jason Ferguson is coming up! It's almost over!"

Izzy lurched to his feet and groggily followed Mary aft to where they could look down a hatch into the stern well. The scene was now partly obscured by continual spray and green water. Tied in a nest of ropes, the landing vessel jerked and pulled like a mad dog trying to escape a net. They heard "One minute!" faintly against the howl of the wind.

Izzy never did see Jason Ferguson come out of the water. The exit area was now a screaming froth of white confusion. Rubber boats moved gingerly and jerkily on these great seas, disappearing in deep hollows, then suddenly flying upward as though on a catapult. And out of this confusion came one of them with the last member of the *Eadie's* crew aboard, rushing in on a cresting wave, coasting a moment in the smother, then gunning up the ramp where black swimmers knee deep in swirling water, handed the orange body into the entrance of a transfer tank. The cable was hooked up and the final load, swinging like a misshapen clock pendulum, went up into the decompression space.

Izzy, already up on the medical deck, took one look in the tiny port of the transfer chamber and turned to Mary, his eyes wide. "He's hurt, Mary!" he shouted and jumped into the entrance lock of the mating medical chamber. "Tell them to bring me up!" he cried as he spun the door shut with a clang.

Izzy, compressed in moments to one hundred and sixty feet of pressure,

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stepped into the decom chamber rubbing his ears as two doctors handed Ferguson's stretcher in through the transfer port. Jason's eyes were closed and he was breathing jerkily and shallowly. Izzy felt his pulse, made some reflex tests, and turned on the doctors. "OK! Let's get his clothes off. We'll ice him! Quick! Chamber operator, give me ninety feet of oxygen in this mask!" He carefully put the mask over Jason Ferguson's nose and mouth and looked out through the window at Mary.

"Izzy, try to get him conscious! Go deeper!" she said tensely into the microphone.

"Operator. Take us to two hundred feet." The air hissed in sharply.

They cut away his clothes with scissors and packed ice around the white skin. "Cold water enema, doctor! Let's get that core temperature down, man! Operator, take us to two hundred and twenty feet!"

At two hundred and eleven feet Cmdr. Ferguson's eyes flew open and he stared at Izzy.

"Jase!" Izzy took the mask off. "How are you feeling, old buddy?"

"I can't feel a thing, prof," said Jason in a soft slur. "I can't turn my head."

Izzy pulled a pin from his lapel and began to poke it into Cmdr. Ferguson's arms and legs, saying tensely, "Can you feel that, Jase? ... that? ... that?"

To which Jason softly answered, "No ... no ... no."

Izzy's face showed bitter pain. "You've taken a high, bilateral spinal hit, Jase, and it's getting worse. There's bad edema ... How's his core doing?"

"Down two degrees, Dr. Kaplan," said the Navy doctor, piling more cracked ice around Ferguson's body.

"I'm very cold, prof."

"We're making you cold, Jase. To supress the spinal edema."

"Prof, do you have my hand? I can't feel you."

"Yes, Jase, yes!"

"My vision is going, prof. I'm looking out of a little dark circle." Izzy felt his hand clench.

"No, Jase, NO!" cried Izzy in sick rage.

Jason Ferguson's eyes closed and he said, as if to himself, "Think of it. Nine hundred and forty feet. My God, prof. We did it!" and his young, wide mouth formed a gentle smile of triumph and satisfaction.

But Izzy, sitting isolated in the hard, inhuman steel cylinder, saw their triumph turn to ashes. He tasted the bitter, metalic vomit of defeat in his throat. He stared at the floor as the doctors rapidly fitted breather and heart thumper on Jason's body, knowing there was no return from this, no return from utter failure. "I curse you, God," said Izzy softly and with acid bitterness. "What was the point, you prick? Why would you let us get this far, you bastard! You sadistic phoney!"

All that long rocky afternoon and evening, *Tringa*, her cables slipped minutes after Jason arrived inside her

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hull, rolled and pitched south, out of the path of the big storm. Izzy sat quietly, his eyes closed, in the tank undergoing computer-controlled decompression. When the door finally swung open, he put Jason's ice-cold hand carefully on his breast and, stooping, tiredly stepped out.

Mary waited and, without a word, held Izzy for a while. But all Izzy could say was, "Henri. I must call Henri, Mary." He walked steadily forward, finally pushing open the door to the radio spaces. The watch officer looked up and saw his face and gently asked, "Yes, Dr. Kaplan?"

"Henri Bettencourt, Lochstrom 624," said Izzy in a voice they barely heard. He went into the booth and sat waiting some undetermined time, his mind completely blank, until the phone rang.

"Izzy?"

"Henri, we lost Jase! He took a terrible spinal hit. Massive! High! The worst I've ever seen. He came to below two hundred and ten feet, but I could see him going. We iced him. Shit, Henri...."

Henri's voice was cool and distant. "I don't understand, Izzy, why you medical people have not solved that long ago. If you could locate the gas injury, you could certainly intervene with a tissue-shrinking drug in moments. Why haven't you studied the physics of the edema and of the gas-injured tissue in relation to norms? Perhaps acoustics could find it, Izzy? You should urge Cmdr. Ferguson's prosector to preserve and section the injury area for physical analysis."

Izzy stared down at the phone. "Intervene? Shrink the edema? Tissue physics?" He rubbed his eyes. "You're right, Henri. Of course." Then he remembered Jason's soft, triumphant smile and he fell silent.

"Izzy ... Izzy," and now Henri spoke more warmly. "Come back to us at Lochstrom when *Tringa* gets in. I will meet you in London. We will do those things together, Izzy. No one ever wins completely, Izzy. That never happens in this life."

Izzy was nodding mechanically. "All right. Yes. You're right Henri. We can solve it, like all the other problems." And he was still nodding when a soft knock came on the door of the booth.

"Dr. Kaplan, your wife and Sen. Briggs are waiting for you in the senior wardroom."

As he walked forward, Izzy noticed that the rolling had almost ceased and that *Tringa* was boring steadily ahead into calmer seas. "It figures they'd arrive now," said Izzy to no one in particular.

Molly, handsome and slick in a classy pants outfit, and the Senator in his turtleneck and yachty sportswear stared at Izzy's ravaged face and hot eyes. But Izzy ignored them, turning to Kincaid. "I saved your ass, admiral. Kiss the beads for that!" he said harshly.

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"Never fear, Dr. Kaplan. You'll be rewarded," said Kincaid icily, his eyes filled with hate.

Izzy shook his head. "Don't embarrass yourself and those yellow bosses of yours in Washington by offering me a medal. I'll refuse it publicly. If you'd gotten to the buoyant ascent sooner, even a few hours sooner, we might have gotten Jase up before that fucking sea-state turned to Hell." Izzy drew in a long breath.

"Old sailors never die," said Molly coldly to them both. "Young ones do."

"The peace bitch speaks!" cried Izzy. "And aren't we tough-minded, we wonderful folks running this wonderful country!"

Thaddeus Briggs, looking pained, smoothed his long white hair and drew his distinguished eyebrows together. "Now, just a moment, Dr. Kaplan. I think we should realize that this operation was extraordinarily successful...."

Izzy looked at them with contempt. "You can fuck my wife, Senator, but don't think you can fuck my head! The three of you aren't fit to touch the ravelings on Jason Ferguson's undershorts. How is it that somebody that fine and brave and strong must break his great heart so you assholes can fuck and drink and spend our money on any goodie or power-trip your little hearts desire? I hate your guts, all of you! Who cares about a society that has bastards like you leading it!"

Izzy turned and left, walking rapidly aft and downward until he reached the sick bay. He opened the door of a small operating theater and, suddenly brisk, strode in and picked a gown off the rack.

They were all there: Mary, Capt. Gold, several other hyperbaric specialists, forming a circle around Jason Ferguson's body. They had immersed Jason in water so that the gas emboli would be readily seen during the autopsy. They all looked up and stared at Izzy.

"Izzy," said Mary quietly. "Are you sure you want to be here?"

Izzy smiled formally at her, then took the small circular cutting saw from Dr. Gold's hand. "I'm going to do it, Mary," He nodded at Gold. "Start the tape, Manny, we'll talk our way through this."

He bent over the white body and started the saw. "I've talked with Henri Bettencourt. He urges us to locate the gas damage and edema and to freeze and section it. Then we can...."

There were now only three sounds in the room: Izzy's voice, the shrill, tiny whine of the saw, and the steady plop, plop, plop of Izzy's tears falling into the water bath. Yet the first cut that opened Jason's chest was as straight as if made with a steel edge.

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"That's tone control. The volume's up there."

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Books

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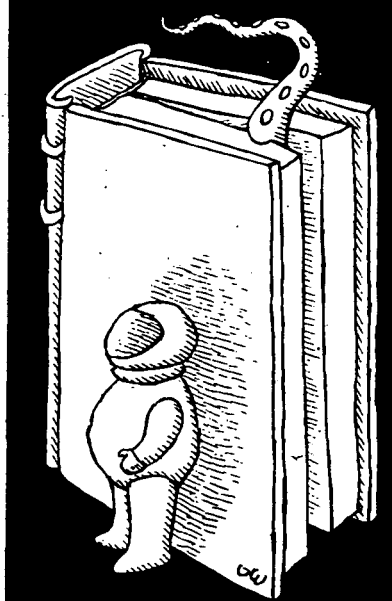

Re: Colonised Planet 5 Shikasta Doris Lessing. A.A. Knopf, $10.95

A Secret History of Time to Come Robie Macauley. A. A. Knopf, $9.95

There's something we had best get used to, and that's the SF novel by the non-SF writer. Day in, day out, SF is presently the best-paying market for commercial fiction, as well as a "genre"* with heavy academic and critical attention. Out there are scores of ambitious literateurs in search of the buck and the reputation, to say nothing of those who cannot be listed among the venal but who would never have thought of doing SF work if their attention hadn't been called to it.

So you can count on visitors. A few will have staying power, or will at least leave behind something of value. One thinks at once of George R. Stewart with *Earth Abides*, and one does not regret the occasional SFnal ventures of Graham Greene and Nevil Shute (Try *The Rainbow and The Rose;* and *An Old Captivity* is two-thirds of a fascinating piece of work, which Poul Anderson ought to make arrangements to finish someday).

We can't count people like Orwell or Huxley, or even M.P. Shiel, who all

**It's not a genre, but everybody says it is. I will fight that battle some other day.*

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wrote from the standpoint that social satire has never been distinguishable from "mainstream" writing. What I'm talking about are people who are lately becoming somewhat aware of "space fiction," as Doris Lessing calls it. Let us now see what Doris Lessing has done:

Doris Lessing is of course also the author of *Memoirs of a Survivor*, as Betty Hull reminds me; a moody, in a sense circumstantial tale focused on one corner of a rotting society. Nothing too startling, but not too shabby, and distinguished by the effective juxtaposition of Lessing's echolalial style and an insane milieu.

Now, however, we have *Re: Colonised Planet 5 Shikasta*, and a much more ambitious scope. There is a Canopan interstellar empire, one of several, inhabited by superbeings whose spirituality is so advanced that their technology depends upon achieving perfect accord with the harmonies of the Universe. There is an opposed empire — that of Puttioria — and within the general Puttioran gestalt is the vile offshoot of the Shammat rebels. The empire of Canopus seeks to make an Eden of Earth. Shammat intrudes; disharmony occurs, and the promising beginning winds down into wretchedness, accounting for our present lamentable condition.

Doesn't sound all that bad, does it? There are things that will drive an SF reader wild if one is so inclined — little but infuriating things like using "Canopean" instead of "Canopan" as the genitive; like having the Canopans refer to their home planet as Canopus ... unless Lessing means to imply that they live directly on the star; like having the various empires organized so that they fit the constellations *as seen from Earth;* like having a "comet" which will denude another Canopan colony in 20,000 years, necessitating the crash development of Earth as a substitute ... can that really be a comet? Can a society in harmonious tune with the Universe, capable of perceiving multiple planes of existence, travelling at multiples of the speed of light, fostering a not-too-bright race of giants who nevertheless can teach humans to move giant stones ... can these people not give this comet a little nudge at some point 20,000 years prior to grazing approach? Apparently not, perhaps because if they could then none of Lessing's story would have needed to happen.

But except for that last objection, which surely even a mundane reader might ponder, all those other annoyances are instances of an author simply not knowing our conventions, which is surely excusable, or of not really knowing what goes on out there among the lights in the sky, which many Lessing fans also neither know nor care about. We could jump up and down about that all day, and simply look dumb — it's not us she's writing for, even though it's surely us her publisher is attempting to include in the market.

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But even Lessing's established audience is going to have heavy weather with this one, I think. *Shikasta* — I cannot resist giving the full title; it's: *Canopus in Argos — Archives; Re: Colonised Planet 5 Shikasta. Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by Johor (George* Sherban, Emissary (Grade 9) 87 of the Period of the Last Days — is written in the form of a collection of documents comprising a simulacrum of exactly what the title promises. It's written in Bureaucratese, using both the civil service and the academic dialects of that secret language. There is also a serious incursion of Babu, that marvelous tongue spoken by people who are so spiritually advanced that they could never soil their tongues by simply calling a spade a spade. In other words, there is essentially no dialogue, and all the action is recounted as a series of perfervid anecdotes. For my money, only the most masochistic reader could penetrate much beyond the second chapter unless he were paid to do so. The scalp crawls at the news that Lessing is so enthused with her construct that this particular file drawer in the Canopean archives represents only the first in a series of projected books. We may be in at the inditing of a note of professional suicide.

But never mind that; I may be wrong, somehow. It's a funny old world, and there appear to be a great many people in it who will enthuse over the God-damnedest stuff provided it comes from the right person at the right time. Let's temporarily stick to whether we might find something to like in it ... we here in the SF community.

Well, there was this burst of solar radiation, and some hairy little mammals on this obscure little planet began developing bipedal locomotion, the crude use of tools, and a certain amount of tinkerage with fire. So the Canopeans sent down a race of gentle giants to live with us on Earth ... sorry, that was supposed to be a surprise ... in "symbiosis," which Lessing thinks is a synonym for stewardship. They taught us how to build exactly geometrical cities, set up rows of standing stones, and —

Oh, you've read stories which explain the King James reference to 'giants in the earth.' Well, also, for a while these accelerated humans live a very long time, so that additionally takes care of Methuselah, in a triple play with Von Daniken. Plato's Atlantis is of course included in this rationale ... and who do you think the few unmutated furry bipeds are, if they aren't the Abominable Snowman? I have to confess I'm not certain whether the Loch Ness monster is ever rationalized somewhere in this account; past a certain point, I began to skim even though I was being paid. I do believe there is no instance in which two aliens land on the planet and become Adam and Eve, but I'm certain the idea is in Lessing's notes somewhere and may

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appear in the next volume.

The thing that worries me as a literateur is that this farrago of cliches has been mistaken by its publishers and will be mistaken by some readers for startlingly original creativity.

Even *Chariots of the Gods* reads like a crib from the "articles" in a 1940s *Amazing Stories:* is it seriously intentioned literature to invent elliptical "explanations" for the stale frothings of a mountebank? Is this the level of creativity that satisfies someone as seriously intentioned as Lessing proposes to be? Her models are rather obviously Olaf Stapledon and C.S. Lewis, with perhaps a jolt of Jack London's *The Star Rover,* but all those dead writers did their *own* thinking.

It's time for a word with A.A. Knopf, publishers of the Lessing and of Robie Macauley's *A Secret History of Time to Come.* Everybody please listen.

Knopf is one of the proudest names in American publishing; a house whose taste and whose willingness to take chances over the years are a model of what so many publishers claim for themselves, and what so few perform. I would guess that this pair of books represents an intelligent, Knopf-like effort to do something noteworthy and worthwhile in the contemporary fiction market as defined to include SF. Well and good; houses like Knopf should be doing exactly that.

But it should be borne in mind by the upper editorial echelons that it takes someone of the caliber of a Pynchon, Cheever or Vonnegut to carry off both ends of the necessary task — to both be a recognized contemporary author with uncommon talent and to produce SF which works *as speculative fiction.* Furthermore, the three writers named immediately above include at least two who have enjoyed a long acquaintance with the commercial newsstand SF which (A) is sometimes written by people fully as adept at ideation and at prose as the very best alive, and (B) in any case has pushed and is rather widely known to have pushed, the evolution of SF ideas to a point far beyond the elementary level displayed by the Lessing and Macauley novels, neither of which has much to recommend it as a novel.

It does not suffice, in other words, to be so taken with what seem to be mind-boggling ideas — but are not — and with literary credentials which may impress but have no power to serve the reader's needs, that your ordinarily high standards of literary judgment are compromised.

I cannot definitely say how the general audience will react to these two offerings. I have my suspicions, based not on SF criteria but on criteria which apply to fiction in general. Those suspicions are dark, but they come from an impeachable source ... that is, from someone who knows something about SF, and who is therefore hopelessly contaminated. But I would sug-

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gest, nevertheless, that you get yourselves a consultant of some literacy who is also familiar with SF.*

Why? Not so he or she can teach you cliches. But so that in reading a manuscript full of cliches "originated" by a writer who has never heard of them before, or is making a valiant effort to turn back to the beginning of this well-advanced century, the consultant's mind will be free to ignore them and penetrate to the essential question, which is Is this damned thing any good to read?

All right, now what about the Macauley novel? Macauley is a certified good guy — years as editor of *The Kenyon Review*, years as fiction editor at *Playboy* without going visibly psychotic, by all accounts a charming and literate person. What has he written in the form of *A Secret History of Time to Come?*

The fast answer is easy. He's written a post-holocaust novel. We begin with the journal — fortunately, the well-written journal — of a captain in the Black Liberation Army Corps, lately a fifteen-year veteran newsman on the Chicago *Sun-Times*. The *Sun-Times* is now the *Black Sun*, and by his own account down to four pages of bad grammar. The insurrection in America's cities is going badly — worse than even the captain suspects.

He dreams, through the burning nights of the summer of 1983, about a barbarian journeying toward him. Somewhere in time ahead, the land is forests; the white barbarian in his leather shirt follows barely discernable traces of roads, carefully husbanding the stained, brittle paper that is a map of the lost forefatherland of Esso. He moves as if in his own dream toward a settlement called Grand Haven, on the near side of a U-shaped blue area, across from some place named Chicago, and he dreams of a room in which a wounded black man in a uniform writes in a book, conceals it, and dies.

The barbarian is named Kinkaid; he is from Pennsylva-land, backtracking the dying stranger with a crossbow who carried the map eastward from the shores of Lake Michigan. The black captain thinks of the savage as Mortmain.* The captain

I do not refer to someone who once taught a course in it, or expresses fashionable contempt for it, or sold one short story, to Future, *in 1957 — although that's not the worst possible credential — or has always been a* Star Trek *fan. I mean someone like Fritz Leiber or Jack Williamson, or Robert A.W. Lowndes, or Virginia Kidd; someone who knows literature on a broad front and is also someone of long and considerable experience in SF. I do not mean someone who has held five "science fiction" editing jobs in the past three years and sports a BA degree dating in the 1970s. If you are going to do it at all, do it with the thought that you are going to nurture a new Hemingway, not corrupt an old one.*

**A nice, allusive, literary touch. Which is immediately thrown away by the author after he has demonstrated that he can, too, communicate with the perceptive, educated reader.*

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is wounded in the shoulder during the disastrous pseudo-relief of Gary. The captain dies, apparently of sheer chagrin, and we never get another hard datum about the black revolution.

We vaguely hear in the background that the USSR has fired missiles into China. Then the next we see is a world depopulated, overgrown, its people living in isolated settlements, illiterate, barely capable of working iron ... Kinkaid's world, as the action shifts forever into an undated future.

Tangled adventures await Kinkaid, and near-death in Noo Meffis, where the Southrons raise cotton and raid the north for slaves. The slaves are white; there are no blacks anywhere. When Kinkaid stumbles across a guerrilla bunker left over from the revolution, he stares in astonishment at an album cover picturing Satchmo Armstrong. (What if it had been Bix?) Eventually, somewhere north of Springfield, Illinois, Kinkaid either freezes to death or lives to reach the raddled Chicago building and the ruined room where the dead rebel's journal waits after centuries. Macauley offers us the choice, just in the same way that Richard Adams copped out in *Plague Dogs*.

Clearly, a novel very much in the tradition of *The Purple Cloud*, *The Twenty-Fifth Hour*, *Earth Abides*, *The Long Loud Silence*, and *No Blade of Grass*, not to mention thirty or forty others, and Benet's short "By the Waters of Babylon," which contains very nearly all features of Macauley's book. The remainder are covered by Wilson Tucker's *Year of the Quiet Sun*. The Benet, you will note, contains them in one-twelfth the wordage.* Furthermore, if you have ever read Edgar Pangborn's *Davy*, any remaining ground has been dealt with more than adequately.

What's that, you say — what about this black revolution idea, and the potentials evident in the black 20th century newsman/future white barbarian juxtaposition? Forget it — when Louis grins up at you from that album jacket, he's commenting on how much Macauley did with *that* one. Even Tucker did more with it, in *Sun*, where it was never intended to be that big a thing, than Macauley does after all this elaborate setting-up.

Well, all right, Noo Meffis — what about *that?* Forget it; the moment that sub-plot gets interesting, Macauley leaves it, never to return, just as he has done with every interesting situation throughout the book. The whole thing is a series of pick-ups and drops. What happened to Greenberg? What happened to the mutants? What is the significance of the recurring image of the ineffectual sheriff? If lingering radiation killed Old Haven in Kalamazoo, why is Chicago still standing? Where, anywhere in the Midwest, is there an Esso station; did they supplant all the

Benet was a Knopf author. Never wrote a novel worth a damn in his life. Didn't have to.

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Amoco and Sohio signs by 1983?

Nothing. *Nothing* ever comes to a recognizable conclusion. For all Macauley's prose skill, and his ability to make an individual scene come alive, we get nothing but broken promises. If the whole of his message is that in the blasted future that is exactly how life will be, then that is a fit task for a nicely crafted short story such as, for example, "The Portable Phonograph" by a fellow who wrote it quite a few years ago.* Macauley's excellences work against him; time after time, he maneuvers his characters, or his reader, into a situation that cries out for more about it, and every time he detumesces.

A literary gent like Macauley can pull that sort of trick forever, provided someone will continue to pay the freight. Any damn fool can write great opening scenes if he doesn't have to know what they'll lead to. Any clown can take a snip of this and a bit of that and keep it up for 60,000 words until it's time for the cop-out ending.

Is this damned thing any good to read? Do you hear me, Knopf? IS THIS DAMNED THING ANY GOOD TO READ?

Walter van Tilburg Clark, also author of The Track of The Cat, *a superb Western in the same sense that* Crime and Punishment *is an outstanding suspense novel.*

SMALL PRESS BOOKS RECEIVED

Who Goes There, A Bibliographic Dictionary of Pseudonymous Literature in the Fields of Fantasy and Science Fiction, compiled by James A. Rock, James A. Rock & Co., 110 S. Indiana Ave., Bloomington, Indiana 47401, 201pp., $10.95 paper, $23.95 cloth. A well produced reference work that provides a checklist of over 1200 authors and over 2,000 pseudonyms.

The Reign of Wizardry by Jack Williamson, Phantasia Press, 13101 Lincoln, Huntington Woods, Mich. 48070, 193 pp., $15.00 regular edition, $25.00 special boxed, signed and numbered edition. First hardbound publication of the novel that first appeared in 1940, in John W. Campbell's magazine, *Unknown.* Full color cover by Steve Fabian.

Survey of Science Fiction Literature, edited by Frank N. Magill, Salem Press, Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Five Volumes containing five hundred 2,000 word essay reviews of world famous science fiction novels.

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A house in the southern mountains that has stood empty for ninety years, and a stranded traveler: the ingredients for a classic fantasy tale from a master. Mr. Wellman's new novel THE OLD GODS WAKEN, was recently published by Doubleday.

What of the Night

BY

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

First he felt savage desperation that his car had stalled on what had nearly ceased to be a mountain road, with the first spiteful raindrops falling in the sunset. A moment later, gratitude that the car had made its dull stop almost in the yard of a house he hadn't seen, there among shadowy trees and bushes. Surely the owners would take him in, help him.

He'd sought these Southern highlands to indulge a young man's whim. His grandfather had been born hereabouts, had prospered in a big town to eastward and had never gone back. So he himself had driven here to explore. Heading away from Asheville, away from paved roads, he had trundled through a land of heights and hollows and forests. Just once he had stopped under shady walnuts, to eat most of his picnic lunch. But then, going on, his road had grown snakily narrow and he had turned off on this gravelly sidetrack in hopes of finding a way back again. All he had found was his motor falling silent and the rain spattering and a house where only strangers would open the door to him.

Getting out, he trotted into the yard, shin deep in dense weeds. Raindrops dabbed his tweed jacket, stroked his thick, dark hair. A tree stood almost at the doorway with branches flung out like shrouded arms. The house, he saw at once, was massively built of rough stones plastered together. Its roof was of flakelike slabs of shale. An ancient door of weathered planks stood between vacantly staring windows. He stepped up on the porch and knocked.

No answer. Only the quickening patter of the rain.

"Hello!" he called. "May I come in? My name's Dale Parr. My car's broken

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down. It's wet out here."

He listened again. Hushed, foggy silence inside.

He pushed at the door. It groaned inward. He stepped into dusty gloom. Blinking, he made out a chamber with several broken chairs, a ruinous sofa beneath a window, a dust-furred table. A sooty fireplace centered the rear wall.

"Hello!" Dale Parr raised his voice again. And no sound.

Then the place must be deserted. Probably no one had been here for years. He hurried through the rain to fetch from his car his suitcase and the paper bag with what was left of his lunch. Back inside, he examined the old fireplace. He hoped that the chimney would draw. He broke up two chairs that were already past mending. Some of the broad old floor planks had begun to crumble from joists beneath, and he ripped chunks from them. Carefully he heaped splinters on a wadded envelope and felt triumph as his match caught and kindled them. He put on larger fragments. The glow and crackle gave some cheer. Outside, the gray light grew slatily murky.

Unlucky about the car but lucky about this shelter, Parr comforted himself. He even had something for supper. There was half a bottle of wine, most of a box of crackers, a slab of good cheese. If he wanted water, it fell briskly outside just now. He could manage here tonight.

Despite the fire, the room seemed curtained in darkness. He squatted at the hearth to eat and drink. The crackers were crisp, the cheese had a grateful tang. He drank from the bottle, but left some to wake up on in the morning. The rain lulled him as he mused. At last he went back to the sofa. It smelled dank, it seemed caked with the dirt and decay of years, but he stretched out on it and closed his eyes. He thought how tired he was, how good it felt to relax. Without trying to, he slept.

And wakened to a glow of light, pale yellow as fresh butter. A voice spoke, the cheerful voice of a young woman:

"Excuse me, sir, but are you quite all right?"

Parr sat up quickly. She stood there smiling. One hand lifted a lamp, beautifully made of polished, cherry-red stone. A glass chimney supported the parchment shade. The light showed her to him.

Her round face tapered to a firm little chin. Curls of hair, tawny brown as syrup, tumbled to either side. She had a straight nose and wide blue eyes and smiled with the fullest and reddest of lips. He got to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he attempted. "I thought this house was deserted. My car broke down and I—"

"Oh, think nothing of that," she smiled. "As a matter of fact, the first time I came here, I thought the house was deserted, too."

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She set the lamp on the table. Cluttering shadows fell back on all sides of the room.

Then he saw her as she was, tall and proud of figure. She wore dark blue, a long skirt and a snug jacket over a white blouse with a black bow at the throat. On one slim hand gleamed a ring, with a stone that flashed sparks. She smiled. Her teeth were small, white. She's beautiful, Parr thought. He felt glad to see her, there in the lamplight, with the rain throbbing outside.

And the room wasn't the crumbled, wasted room he had thought. The table gleamed richly, it was draped with a fringed white cloth. The fire danced on neat andirons. The sofa — not decaying, it had brocaded upholstery, with two black velvet cushions. Hadn't he burned the chairs? But there they were, good chairs, comfortable chairs. A picture hung above the fireplace; he hadn't noticed it before. It was a rich oil portrait of someone with a sternly dignified face and a white shirt front and a black coat with a rolled collar.

She knew he was confused. "We've tidied things up for you," she said, "while you slept so soundly."

"I do sleep soundly," he apologized. "I learned to lie down and sleep anywhere, when I was in the army in Korea."

"Korea?" she repeated the name as though she barely knew it. "Is there a war there?"

"The war's over, I was just there for the occupation." Parr felt glad, talking to her. He wanted to know her better, much better. He wondered if they were true, those stories he had always laughed at, about love at first sight. "My name's Dale Parr," he said. "I came to visit these mountains because my grandfather was born here."

"My name's Tolie," she said in her turn. "Just call me Tolie, because we're going to be friends." She half turned toward a rear door. "The others want to meet you, too."

"The others?"

He heard the disappointment in his own voice that there weren't just the two of them, himself and this girl Tolie who said they were going to be friends.

"Good evening, sir," boomed someone else.

In walked a tall, broad man, in a long black coat like an old-fashioned preacher. His white wing collar pedestaled a heavy, wise face with deepset dark eyes and a blade of nose and strong lines running from nostrils to corners of the firm mouth. He was the man whose picture hung above the fireplace. His hair and his long sideburns were thick and evenly cut. In their blackness glowed tags of gray, like steel-headed pins in cushions. Behind him entered a thinner, younger man, bearing a silver tray with a bottle and four glasses.

"This is Dale Parr," said Tolie to them. "Dale Parr, this is Mr. Addis. He owns this house. And this is Fenton."

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The one with the tray bobbed his head shyly. His clothes were neat and snug on his gaunt body, a bobtailed dark jacket and checked trousers. His face, thought Parr, was furtive, under dull red hair parted in the middle.

"How do you do, Mr. Dale Parr," said Mr. Addis. His broad hand gripped Parr's tightly for just a moment, then let go. "We're glad for the accident that brought you here. Let us offer you some slight refreshment."

He waved for Fenton to set the tray on the table beside the lamp.

"I don't want to impose on you, sir," said Parr.

"No imposition at all," shrugged Mr. Addis.

"If I could telephone for somebody to come and fix my car—"

"Telephone?" echoed Mr. Addis. "We don't have that, Mr. Dale Parr. Sit down, sir. We're going to have a drink, and we make something of a ceremony of that."

Parr took a chair at the table. Tolie came and sat beside him. She gave him the sort of smile that meant for him to feel that they were all alone, he and she, after all; that the others were somewhere else, out of sight.

Again Mr. Addis motioned at Fenton, who poured from the bottle into each glass in turn. Parr took up his drink. It seemed to be little more than a spoonful. Again Tolie seemed to know what he was thinking.

"It's best to have just a sip at a time," she whispered.

"Yes, indeed," seconded the ringing voice of Mr. Addis. "We'll have more later, Mr. Dale Parr." He lifted his own glass. "The first drink is number one, which stands for unity." He looked around at them. "Sitrael," he toasted.

"Unity," said Tolie. "And Sitrael."

"Unity and Sitrael," repeated Fenton.

"Well, unity of course," said Parr, "and the other, though I don't know it."

"Sitrael," prompted Tolie.

"All right, and Sitrael," said Parr.

They drank. The sharp liquor warmed his throat all the way down. He felt grateful for it.

"If you don't mind," said Parr, "I want to wonder out loud about all this. Do I happen to be dreaming?"

"How would you be dreaming?" asked Tolie, almost at his ear.

"Well, but I came in and things were — deserted, abandoned. And I slept and woke up, or I think I woke up —"

"You're not dreaming," said Fenton, his first words.

His voice was timid, it half trembled. Parr wondered if he always sounded like that.

"Let's put it simply," said Mr. Addis, the lamplight winking on the silver points in his hair. "I've spent long years in planning things to suit myself here. I achieved that, and I find that it suits Tolie and Fenton, who are a sort of family to me. We're in the habit of being happy by night. It's always pleasant then. I have my studies and my books. I do what I hope is important research."

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Parr smiled, the liquor warm within him. "And do Tolie and Fenton help you in your research?"

"They divert themselves and thrive on it," said Mr. Addis. "I daresay you'd like to see where I do my work."

Parr had not thought about that, but he had been politely brought up. "If you'd like to show me, sir."

He followed Mr. Addis through the rear door into a sort of hall. Several more doors stood open, one into what seemed a well-appointed kitchen, another into a bedroom. Mr. Addis conducted him into a room with shelved books all the way around, up to where dark beams ran across. The rain assailed a window. A black bearskin lay on the broad floor planks. The only furniture was an armchair and a table loaded with books. A hooded lamp hung from a rafter.

Parr went to the shelves, for he loved books. Here was a leather-bound set of Shakespeare, Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, something with a title in Arabic characters that might or might not have been the Koran. Others, many others.

"For research, those volumes, and for recreation between spells of work," Mr. Addis said. "Here's my present direction of study."

Parr joined him beside the table. The top book of the stack lay open. Its cover looked shaggy, as though it had been bound in some of the bearskin rug. The page was not printed, but beautifully written in a black script that Parr could not read, with the initials of the paragraphs in red.

"Very rare and curious," said Mr. Addis. "The notebook of a German scientist named Kolber. The passage here refers to a friend he knew, Dr. Johannes Faustus."

"Faustus," echoed Parr. "The one in Marlowe's play, in Goethe's play, in Gounod's opera."

"Educated, are you?" said Mr. Addis. His big forefinger touched a line halfway down the page.

"Here's the sort of wisdom that's obvious the moment you hear it," he said. "'All things are possible. If a thing is possible, it can become probable. If it is probable, it can be made actual.'"

"A process of logic," nodded Parr.

Mr. Addis took up another book, in stained blue cloth. "This is by John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's sorcerer."

Parr knew the name. "He hoped to raise spirits."

"And succeeded. Johannes Faustus also experimented along that line."

Parr looked at the table top. It was painted a glossy gray. Upon its surface showed a diagram, sketched in white. It looked like a star, the five rays jutting from the sides of an inner pentagon. Inside the triangular tracings of the rays showed words in strange letters. All around the outer points was drawn a circle.

"I put that pentacle there," said Mr. Addis. "To help in my work."

"I don't know the words on it,"

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confessed Parr. "Some of the S's and N's look reversed."

"They're five names out of one of my books." Mr. Addis smiled with closed lips. "But all this must be tedious to a healthy young man. I think we need another small drink to relax."

"We won't quarrel about that, sir."

In the front room, Tolie and Fenton sat talking on the sofa. They rose as Parr and Mr. Addis came back. Tolie smiled as though in delight. Fenton gazed plaintively.

"Let's try another thimbleful," Mr. Addis said heartily. "Will you do the honors again, Fenton?"

Fenton made obedient haste to pour the drinks. They all sat down. Mr. Addis smiled above his glass.

"Two drinks for companionship, the closeness of two dear friends," he proclaimed.

"Companionship," said Tolie, so close to Parr that their elbows touched. Her look was like a touch.

"Companionship," droned Fenton.

"Companionship," Parr joined in.

"To Palanthan," said Mr. Addis, and drank. They all drank. Again, the liquor was delightfully fiery in Parr's throat.

"I hope you feel companionable, Dale Parr," said Tolie to him. "We're grateful for the storm that brought you to us tonight. Were you interested in what Mr. Addis is doing?"

"He seems to be a very special scholar," he replied, hoping that was tactful. "Of course, I don't have his advantages."

"You have your own advantages," she assured him. "Many advantages. Since you visited his sanctum, would you like to visit mine?"

He looked at the moving lights in her eyes and knew he would like it very much. Fenton watched dolefully as she slid her hand inside Parr's elbow and drew him along to the inner door and to a room beyond.

He had thought it a bedroom, but perhaps it was more than that. The bed itself, with a rainswept window beside it, was both sturdy and elegant, of what looked like black walnut. Its quilt, he recognized, was what his grandmother had called Melody Chain, variously colored squares with smaller squares inside them, assembled into a soft richness. At the bed's foot, a table with a mirror above it. A wardrobe cupboard for clothes. Two stools that, Parr guessed, would interest an antique dealer. And a stand littered with brushes and tubes of paint, and an easel with a canvas of a half-finished night landscape.

"You paint," he said.

"I try to," she told him. "I did the portrait of Mr. Addis over the fireplace. Do you like it?"

She was so close that she only had to whisper.

"Very much, Tolie."

"I'd like to paint you. Maybe I'll do that. Let's sit down."

They sat on the bed. Her hip and

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shoulder touched him, her eyes drank his.

"It's nice here of a night," she said, "but usually so quiet, so much like all nights. I'm glad of somebody new to talk to." Close at hand, she looked at him. "And to talk to me. Now, tell me about yourself."

That, Parr realized, was the most flattering thing a woman could say to a man. Readily he talked about the town he lived in, the college he had attended, the football he had played there, the poems he had tried to write. He explained that a legacy from his grandfather was enough to be idle on, and spoke of his impulse to look at the country where Parrs had lived and worked before he was born.

"And what about you?" he said at last. "And what about all this place I've come to, and what's going on in it?"

"You and I are going on in it, just now. It's hard to explain in a few words, but just accept it, as you accept the inevitable."

"Is this a dream of some kind?" he asked again.

"No, Dale Parr, it's not a dream of some kind," and she moved against him like a nestling cat. "Not a dream of any kind."

"Mr. Addis wants us," said the diffident voice of Fenton.

"We'll come in a moment," said Tolie.

"He's waiting."

A tiny frown creased her forehead. "Well, all right." She got to her feet and smiled sidelong at Parr. "We'll come."

They followed Fenton to the main room. Mr. Addis sat at the table. He smiled his greeting.

"Another drink, a step more in our little ceremony of fellowship," he said. "Sit down, Dale Parr. Sit down, all."

Fenton was trickling bright portions into the glasses.

"Our third drink," said Mr. Addis. "Three is the number of —"

"The Holy Trinity?" suggested Parr.

"Never mind that," said Mr. Addis, almost sharply. Then he smiled and creased his eyes. "To Thamaar," he pronounced.

Tolie and Fenton repeated the name. All drank, and the drink went down warmly. Parr smiled across the table at Fenton, who only looked at Tolie, who looked at Parr.

"Why don't we go back to our room and take up our discussion?" she said.

"I want to show him my quarters," Fenton mumbled. "Show him my work."

Parr felt sorry for this fellow, who had none of Mr. Addis's assurance, none of Tolie's sparkle. "All right," he said, rising. "Let's go, Fenton. I'll be interested."

Fenton's room was at the far end of the hall, past the kitchen. It appeared to be a sort of lean-to addition, built at the rear of the house. Rain drummed

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its shed roof. Light came from three fat, green candles burning in a sconce of dim brass on the round marble top of a table. Fenton's bed was a cot against a wall. There was a sort of bench of weathered wood. It was cluttered with tools. A set of rough shelves held bottles, racked test tubes, a Bunsen burner. Beside the sconce on the table lay sheets of scribbled paper.

"Then you're a scientist," said Parr. "A practicing scientist. I wish I knew more about things like that."

"Maybe I could teach you." Fenton stared at the table: "I'm trying some rather specialized matters. Mr. Addis has showed me things in his books, worth developing." He seemed more cheerful for a moment. "For instance, the universal alkahest."

"The alkahest?" repeated Parr. "The complete solvent, to turn base metal into gold, cure all diseases, give eternal life? Scientists have looked for that in every age. Nobody ever found it."

"Somebody's got to find it," said Fenton. "Somebody will. If I turn out to be the somebody, then I'll do so many things. Have so many things."

"Have what?"

"Perhaps love." Fenton tramped to the workbench and gazed out at the rainy night. "If it was nice out there, with a moon, I'd show you my garden, the herbs I grow. Potent, some of them."

He picked up a small metal case, set with levers and a lens.

"But lately," he said, "I've been working on a special camera. When I finish it, I'll make beautiful photographs of Tolie."

"Any photograph of Tolie would be beautiful," said Parr, and Fenton glanced up quickly, as though he had been stuck with a pin.

Tolie was at the door. "I don't want to butt in," she said, "but Mr. Addis insists he won't drink alone."

Parr nodded, to show that he would come at once. "Love," he said to Fenton, "is what everyone wants. What everyone needs."

"Do you want it and need it?"

"Naturally," smiled Parr. "Come on, let's go with Tolie."

They went, Fenton lagging at the rear. Mr. Addis sat in his chair. Probably he had not moved. Again Fenton measured out liquor into the glasses.

"Four drinks represent the four corners of a strong house, proof against storms and shelter for friends," said Mr. Addis. "Falaur."

They drank.

"Tell me, sir, what are the names you say in those toasts?" asked Parr.

"The names of the Kings of the North," replied Mr. Addis. "Names of mighty command and force."

"May I say something?" Parr ventured. "My first reaction here was just gratitude for your hospitality and entertainment." He could feel Tolie's smile. "But I still don't understand what you do here, who you are. I hope I'm not being too inquisitive."

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"Not at all," said Mr. Addis, while Tolie and Fenton listened. "We owe you an explanation. As I said, we've been here for a number of years. I give myself over to my studies, Fenton— follows his, Tolie brightens both our lives and relieves our tedium. Your coming, if I may say so, has been a welcome event. You'll like it here better and better as time goes on."

Parr set down his glass. "I think this will sound stupid, but I'll ask it, anyway. Do you happen to be haunting this house?"

Mr. Addis chuckled. Tolie's laugh was like silver. Fenton only swallowed. "Naturally we haunt it," said Mr. Addis. "It's our house."

"I mean," said Parr, feeling highly ridiculous, "are you — all right, are you dead?"

Louder laughter at that, even from Fenton this time.

"Some might think so, but I assure you we feel very much alive," said Mr. Addis cheerfully. "You seem uneasy, my young friend."

"I said it was stupid," said Parr. "After all, how could a house be haunted by even the ghosts of old furniture?"

"Maybe if the furniture died and dusted away," said Tolie. "Is that logic, Dale Parr?"

"Let's think about it while we have one more drink," said Mr. Addis. "The fifth."

Fenton busied himself with the bottle.

"The fifth drink, five," Mr. Addis half chanted. "The five points of the star. Of the pentacle, symbol of wonder and mastery." He raised his glass high. "Sitrami," he said.

"Sitrami," said Tolie after him, leaning toward Parr.

"No!" screamed Fenton wildly.

He leaped up from his chair, striking across the table. Parr's glass flew from his hand and shattered on the floor.

"You, so sure of yourself," Fenton yammered at Parr, "are you too blind to see? Five drinks, all five Kings of the North called up — five drinks, and you'll be here forever, too!"

Mr. Addis had surged to his feet in a flutter of coattails. "Are you out of your mind, Fenton?" he demanded.

"You'd claim him, bring his spirit here, too," Fenton quavered. "Bring him here forever — and Tolie wants him here!"

"Don't be any more of a fool than you can help," snapped out Tolie, also rising.

Fenton reached for her with both hands. "You know I love you," he wailed. "I'd hoped and hoped the time would come when —"

His face twisted.

"But now he's here, and I see how you look at him, hear how you talk to him — you want him, and I—I—"

She slapped Fenton's face. It was like the crack of a shot. He reeled back from it. Mr. Addis advanced on him.

"Run!" Fenton howled at Parr.

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"Get out of here, or you'll be like us, you'll be here forever, too!"

Parr ran, without waiting to wonder why he ran. He heard Tolie call his name, heard the feet of Mr. Addis on the floor as though in pursuit. Then he was tearing the door open, hurrying out and away, with the rain beating down upon him.

Later, he could never say which way he ran along the road, or through what drenching, clinging thickets when he stumbled out of it, or when the rain stopped and the stars and the moon glared down at him. But the sun was rising brightly when he staggered, all soggy and muddy and exhausted, into a little town called Sky Notch.

The people at the store there gave him coffee but only gazed at him until he panted out that his name was Dale Parr. Then big Duffy Parr came across from his service station and said they must be third or maybe fourth cousins. Someone brought more coffee and they heard his story and talked it over.

They believed him. They knew something about that house. It had stood empty for something like ninety years. The man of the house was Alexander Addis, who claimed all sorts of knowledge and special power, who once had stood out in a storm and dared God to strike him with lightning. After he'd died strangely and been buried without a funeral, there had been rumors about a haunting. Then a bright, wilful girl named Tolie Crummitt had visited there after dark on a dare and had been found stone-dead afterward. A limp young admirer, Fenton Cash, had sorrowed over her and vowed he'd go to her dying place and try to call her ghost to him. He, too, was found dead next morning. After that, folks decided to stay away.

The storekeeper allowed that, sure enough, maybe even the dead furniture could come to life with the human ghosts. Others nodded, to show they found good logic in that. But neither Duffy Parr nor anybody else would agree to go back and start the stalled car, even in the broad open light of the day. Finally Preacher Frank Ricks, in town to hold church service tomorrow, spoke up.

Preacher Ricks was old and leanly sinewy, with spectacles on his long nose. It appeared that he'd read about the Five Kings of the North in Reginald Scot's *Discouverie of Witchcraft*, which told about them in order to deny the wickedness credited to them. He refused to say the five names out loud, or permit Dale Parr to speak them. But he declared that he was protected by the Helmet of Salvation, and all right, he'd carry Dale Parr back there, in his shabby old sedan.

They used up most of an hour along those roads that were scarcely roads at all, and Parr wondered how many miles he'd fled in the stormy night to get to Sky Notch. At last they found his stalled car. Preacher Ricks hoisted the hood and tinkered expertly until the motor started again. When

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they were satisfied there would be no more trouble, they went, side by side, into the weedy yard. The tree with the armlike branches watched them, with puddles of water caught among its roots. The air was murky, just as it had been last evening.

"Let's go in, brother," said Preacher Ricks, and Parr followed him up on the rotten porch and in through the open doorway.

Nothing whatever in that shadowed front room, except dust and rot and tumbledown furniture and, of course, Parr's suitcase and the wine bottle and the scraps of his lunch in the paper sack. Preacher Ricks went through the rear door, with Parr forcing himself to walk just behind. In Tolie's room showed the bed, a grimy ruin. In Mr. Addis's study, the shelves hung shattered from the wall, and there were no books anywhere. Fenton's lean-to quarters were another shambles. Finally, the two returned to the front room.

"This place should be exorcised," said Parr, remembering a film about such things. "Do you know how to do that?"

"No," frowned Preacher Ricks, shaking his head. "The faith I follow doesn't hold much with exorcism. The holy rituals I know are baptism, communion, burial of the dead, and so on. I know them by spirit anyway, if not word for word by heart. Do you think those might do?"

He did not wait for any answer but drew himself up stiffly and began to repeat the baptismal service. In the midst of it he paced outside and came back with a palmful of water dipped from the puddle at the tree's root. He nodded at Parr, who knelt. Preacher Ricks put his big wet hand on Parr's head. "Sanctify this water to the

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mystical washing away of sin," he intoned, and Parr wondered if he didn't hear, somewhere in the room, the catch of a breath and then the painful sigh of its being let out.

Then Preacher Ricks took up Parr's wine bottle and from the bag fetched out a broken cracker. He recited the rite of communion. Again Parr knelt. When Preacher Ricks put a bit of the cracker on his tongue and said to him, "Feed on it in your heart and be thankful," Parr again heard the catch of breath and the sigh.

Finally they both stood and Preacher Ricks repeated the service for the burial of the dead. The gloom seemed to thicken itself around them. But at last the hushed voice came to, "Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you." Then light suddenly stole into the room. Parr, looking sidelong at the open door, saw sunshine in the yard that had been so shadowed.

Preacher Ricks cleared his throat. "Do you think it looks sort of different in here?" he asked Parr. "Like as if it had somehow cleared up?"

"In here and outside both," replied Parr. "Maybe you've truly put those spirits to rest."

"Let's devoutly hope so."

They walked out. No haze, no shadows.

"Bring your car along behind mine, back to Sky Notch," said Preacher Ricks. "We'll see if some kind soul there won't let us have some breakfast."

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Tom Godwin wrote a good amount of sf in the 50's and 60's, including the classic story "The Cold Equations" (1954), which is currently being made into a feature film. This unusual tale is Mr. Godwin's first story in several years.

Before Willows Ever Walked

BY

TOM GODWIN

Derken walked away from the carport, his mail in his hand. He glanced at the familiar scene; the distant purple mountains, the desert valley like a forest of Joshua trees, his modern house out of place among them.

They somewhat resembled many-limbed palm trees; their green, daggerlike leaves tipped with sharp thorns. They seemed alien to him, like things that had survived far beyond their time.

Smith thought they were beautiful and even thought there was something mystical about them, the way some superstitious fools almost believed there had once been a time when willow trees could walk at night.

He looked at the mail again, as he walked toward the house, to make sure there was no letter from Mary Weston. But there was only a butane bill and a tabloid-size circular, folded in half.

Very soon he would not have to worry about Smith's granddaughter locating him. Smith was drinking heavily, feeling sorry for himself because his wife and daughter had died and — he thought — his granddaughter had died.

Smith was weak and sentimental when he was drinking too much — which had been all of the time for months. He had been easily handled —

His musing was shattered by the vicious, burning lash of thorns across his forehead.

Once again, he had walked under the lower limb of the Joshua tree that stood between the carport and the house.

He cursed, breathing heavily as he tried to control his temper. He wanted to smash the thing, to destroy it. But Smith would not approve — and half a million dollars was at stake.

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How many times had he walked into that limb lately? And why was it dropping lower all the time?

He walked on to the house. He saw his reflection in the glass door and was pleased by what he saw. With his dyed hair and carefully trimmed mustache he looked much younger than his forty-eight years. Women had always seemed to find him attractive, and as soon as he got Smith's money he could have plenty—

He heard Smith coughing and opened the door. It was time to get back to business.

Smith was sitting in a chair in the living room; thin and old, his eyes hollow in his gaunt face and his hair as white as snow. He looked at the mail in Derken's hand with the expression of one who still clings to hope and knows he hopes in vain.

"There was nothing for me, Jake?" he asked, like a man who already knew the answer.

"Nothing," Derken said in a tone of commiseration. "I'm afraid there will never be."

"I know." There was resignation in Smith's voice. "I've been hoping that Mary lived, after all, but its no use."

"We have to face it, Joe. The people with whom Mary was staying notified you that she was so badly injured in the same automobile accident that killed your daughter that the doctors did not expect her to live. If she lived she would have written to you long before now."

Smith nodded and took another drink from the quart whiskey bottle on the table beside him. Derken took a chair across the table from him and rubbed his still-burning forehead.

"Are Joshua tree limbs supposed to keep dropping lower?" he asked.

"The longer limbs of older Joshua trees will sometimes do that," Smith answered.

"The lower limb of that one beside the path, just outside, has been dropping ever since my wife died, ten months ago. It has dropped two inches in the last twenty-four hours."

"It has?" Smith looked surprised. "Are you sure?"

"Hell, yes, I'm sure — I just walked into it!"

"That's unusual," Smith said, then he shrugged. "I would say it's returning the sentiments."

"What do you mean?"

"You told me, when I first came here, that your wife loved Joshua trees and you hated them. You said that if it had not been for the objections of your wife, you would have had all the Joshua trees bulldozed off this desert lot and replaced with a city-type lawn. Evidently the Joshua trees don't like you any more than you like them."

"Do you mean —" He stared at Smith. "Are you trying to tell me that a mindless plant can have emotions?"

"Of course. Many people firmly believe — and I have seen it — that flowers shown affection will flourish much better than those that are not."

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"Ah ... only because of the extra care such flowers get," he said. "I can no more believe plants can have emotions than I can believe that once willows could walk."

He saw that the mail was still in his lap. He picked up the butane bill and tossed the circular on the table. A letter slid out from between the folded halves of the circular, and Smith picked it up to hand it back.

He stiffened as he saw the address. He looked at Derken, his eyes wide and his mouth working soundlessly before he could speak.

"Mary is alive!"

Derken leaned over quickly, not wanting to believe. But there it was: From Mary Weston of Pine Mountain, Montana, addressed to Smith in care of the Green Valley Rest Home, Everton, Colorado, and forwarded to Box 718, Red Rock, Nevada.

"Alive!" There was incredulous wonder in Smith's eyes. *"Mary is alive!"*

He felt the shock of defeat, the end to all his carefully laid plans.

And he had planned well, destroying the letters Smith and his granddaughter had written to each other and faking a reply from a fictitious Las Vegas detective agency. And finally, after nine months, convincing Smith that Mary was dead; that there was no one in the world who cared for him except his good friend, Derken.

Smith had signed a new will, leaving him everything as well as giving him power of attorney and agreeing that a joint bank account should be opened up between them in Las Vegas.

A flawless plan — and then he had stupidly failed to thoroughly check his mail!

But there still might be a chance —

He stood up and slapped Smith on the back. "That's wonderful, Joe — wonderful! We thought you had lost Mary but you hadn't! Now, read the letter."

Smith opened the letter with shaking hands, and Derken read it over his shoulder:

... I have written to you so many times — where do my letters go? ... I lived, Grandpa — I didn't die, like they thought I would ... If only I knew where you are, I would start for there tomorrow ... Please write to me, Grandpa — I love you so much and you are all I have left, now....

"I just read the letter," he said, before Smith could speak. "You know, I think it would be nice if you could surprise her by flying up there. I think you'll be strong enough in only a few days."

In only a few more days, he thought — *Emphysema, rapidly increasing conjestive heart failure, far too much whiskey* — Yes, in only a few days.

Smith shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I'll send her the money to come here. She never got a one of all those other checks I sent her."

Then, with a puzzled look on his

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face, he said, "I wonder why neither of us ever got the other's letters? And why did the detective agency write me that Mary was dead?"

He thought quickly. "The mail service these days — or maybe a new employee at the rest home failed to forward her letters. And I'm going to find out about that detective agency today."

"Try to phone Mary before you go," Smith said. "I guess she doesn't have a phone — you'll have to get in contact with her through the sheriff's office up there."

Derken went to the phone and used 9 instead of 0 to dial the operator. He dialed several times, said "Hello" several times, then put the phone back.

"The phone is still out of order," he said. "I'll phone her from Las Vegas."

Smith had made out a check for two thousand dollars and was writing a short letter to her; one in which he told her of his surprise and happiness at learning she was alive and of his wanting to see her again, as soon as possible.

Smith finished the letter and put it in the addressed envelope she had enclosed.

"Telegraph the money so she'll get it without delay," he said.

Derken picked up the letter and check. "I'm on my way."

He walked up the path toward the carport with a feeling of relief. The situation was nowhere near as bad as he had first thought. All he had to do was to play a delaying game for a few more days. Then the old fool would be dead and —

Thorns slashed across his forehead, far worse then before. He reeled back, cursing, half slobbering in his rage.

Why could he never see the damned thing? And why was it striking harder each time?

A thought came to him, with a queer feeling of appreciation.

Smith insisted that Joshua trees had emotions, and Smith loved Joshua trees. Did they love him in return?

The closer that he, Derken, came to success in his plans, the more vicious the reaction from the Joshua tree.

He shook his head to clear his mind of the irrational thought and wiped the flecks of blood from his forehead. The limb was dropping because it was weak at the base. He had walked into it because he had been too preoccupied to notice it.

But when he stooped to walk under it, he half expected to feel the jab of thorns in the back of his neck.

He went on to his car and looked at it appraisingly. It was a Chevrolet, already two years old. Soon he would have the money to buy a new Cadillac, a car in keeping with the public image he had created for himself: Jacob Derken, rich, retired, big-city business man.

He got in his car and decided he would not take the long route by way of Red Rock but would take the graded short-cut through the Joshua tree forest.

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As he drove into the depths of the forest, it gave him the same sensation it had always given him, that of being something alien and aloof, stretching on and on into some dark and obscure past.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons he hated it.

The road curved frequently, to avoid as many Joshua trees as possible. He spun the steering wheel, cursing the sentimental, soft-headed county road department for giving more consideration to Joshua trees than to human convenience.

If it hadn't been for the fact that his Western-born, desert-loving wife was the one who had the money, he would never have come to the miserable, god-forsaken place.

He came to still another curve, which swung sharply to miss a tall Joshua tree. It was an old tree, so old that many of its limbs had died and fallen to the ground.

He stopped there and got out of the car to burn the letter Smith had written. The check came out of his shirt pocket with the letter and was caught by a passing gust of wind. It fluttered away and came to rest under the Joshua tree.

He walked over to pick it up. Smith had made it out to Mary Weston, and it was of no value to him, but it would not do for some nosy person to find it and show it around Red Rock.

He crumpled the letter and check together and dropped them, burning, to the ground. He looked at the Joshua tree and wondered if Smith would think it should resent what he was doing to a dreamer who loved them.

Nothing happened and he laughed at his fancy. He turned to go back to his car, and something struck him a heavy blow on the shoulder, knocking him to his knees. He felt the sting of dry thorns.

The dead limb rolled off his shoulder and thudded to the ground. He stood up, wincing at the pain as he touched his shoulder.

He looked at the limb, feeling the blaze of impotent anger. He could do nothing, now, but the next time he would bring gasoline and burn the limb and the tree it came from.

He started again for his car. Fifteen feet on, he came to a small Joshua tree, no more than ten inches tall, its leaves bright green from its youngness. It had probably sprouted from one of the seeds of the old tree.

And, if left alone, the thing would keep growing....

He kicked at it. He had the illusion that it moved as he did so, dodging. His foot missed and he fell headlong, striking his injured shoulder and ramming one hand into another thorn-laden limb.

He stood up, his mind a red haze of rage.

"Damn you — damn you!"

He kicked again and again, stamping the little Joshua tree into the sand. He jerked it the rest of the way out of

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the ground and flung it to one side. It seemed to try to move after it struck the ground, to try to turn over. Then it lay still, its young, tendril-like roots exposed to the hot sun.

He spoke to the old Joshua tree:

"I just killed your child." He heard himself laugh, a laugh that was high and not quite sane. "I just killed your baby — how do you like that?"

His answer was silence — even the desert breeze was still. Then he felt the cold — a cold that was not cold. The sun was still shining from a cloudless sky.

But there was *something* — something was causing a chill within him and making his heart beat faster.

Something wanted to kill him....

He looked about him, at the Joshua trees surrounding him. They were standing silent and motionless, but their arms seemed to be pointing at him in mute accusation.

He knew, then, what wanted to kill him.

The Joshua trees!

He ran to his car. He was afraid — more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

He was out of the Joshua tree forest and well on his way along the Las Vegas highway before the feeling left him.

In Las Vegas he went to the bank and arranged for the transfer of Smith's five hundred thousand dollars, which was in an Oregon bank, to the joint account in the Las Vegas bank. He then bought another quart of whiskey for Smith, picked up all the literature he could at a travel bureau, and started for home.

He did not take the short-cut.

At home he remembered to avoid the Joshua tree as he walked to the house. There was something very different about it, now; something that had not been there that morning. It, and all the other Joshua trees in his yard, seemed to have a coldness about them, like that of those in the forest. They seemed to be staring at him, as though waiting for something.

Could the increasingly painful stabs of the Joshua tree in his yard and the even more painful blow on his shoulder from the tree in the forest have actually been warnings? Today he had killed a baby Joshua tree, in addition to what he was doing to Smith and his granddaughter....

Were they now beyond warning him again? If so, what could they do to him?

He tried to put the thoughts from his mind. He was imagining things, like a frightened child.

But he hurried on into the house, to shut out the coldness around him.

Smith was sitting in his chair, a hopeful look on his face.

"Good news, old buddy," he said to Smith. "I talked to Mary. Even over the phone I could tell how excited and happy she was. She sent you her love

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and said she'll be down the day after she graduates from high school — a week from next Tuesday."

"Good," Smith said. "All this makes me so happy that I feel like I must be dreaming."

"No dream, old buddy." He set the bottle of whiskey on the table by Smith. "I bought you some more of this — it seems to be helping you."

"I feel a lot better today, but I think it was that letter from Mary. Maybe, pretty soon, I'll be able to have something more solid than soup."

"Sure you will. I went to the detective agency. Their man had gone on a spree in Reno and faked that report. They paid back your money."

He went into the kitchen where he took a steak from the refrigerator and put it in the oven to broil. He poured Smith a cup of canned beef broth, curling his lip in distaste at the hooves-hide-and-hair smell of it, and took a can of beer from the refrigerator.

He went back into the living room and set the cup of soup beside Smith.

"Have a slug of appetizer, then drink this," he said. He sat down near Smith and gingerly touched his swollen shoulder.

"You seem to know a lot about Joshua trees," he said. "Do you think they can have emotions other than friendliness?"

"What kind of emotions?"

"Such as hatred or the desire for revenge."

"I think so."

"Would Joshua trees want revenge if someone deliberately killed one of their babies?"

Smith looked at him sharply. "Did you do that today?"

"Of course not! I just wanted your opinion."

"I feel sure that they would want revenge."

He took another drink of beer, wondering why he was asking for Smith's wild, fantastic opinions. But he had to know....

"How could a Joshua tree ever harm anyone?"

"The plant kingdom is entirely different from the animal kingdom. They would have their own methods."

"But how, when they're rooted to the ground, incapable of movement?"

"It would be something subtle and unexpected. The human would not realize what had been planned for him until too late."

He said, carefully, "You make them sound — interesting."

"There is a mystery surrounding Joshua trees. Why are they here, long beyond their time? Why do they grow only in certain areas? Are they the vanishing remnants of what was once a powerful race? What will become of them when they grow so old that their magic is no longer strong enough to protect them?"

"Magic?" he asked. He had not realized, before, the extent of Smith's belief in the dream world he had created.

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"You can feel it as you walk out among them. There is a fascination — a feeling that you are walking back and back into time and that just a little farther on you will find enchanted castles and dragons, vampires and werewolves, elves and faerie princesses with their golden wands — all the things which the world now knows only as myths and legends.

"You have the feeling that if you walk far enough you will go back into time even beyond these things, back so long ago that it was" — he smiled faintly at Derken — "before willows ever walked."

Derken stook up, aware of the implication.

"I have some work to do in the kitchen," he said.

He waited restlessly until the steak was done, then ate it without pleasure. He could not get Smith's statements out of his mind.

He went back to the living room and sat down near Smith.

"I appreciate everything you've done. Sometimes grief and loneliness can be worse than any physical pain. I think — I know — that was why I was drinking too much."

"Ah..." Derken made a gesture of dismissal. "If I had thought you were drinking too much, I would have told you so."

"There will be no more whiskey. I have someone to live for, now."

He started to object; then he saw the perfect solution to the problem.

"You may well be right," he said. "No more whiskey."

Night finally came. He helped Smith to his bedroom and then went to bed, himself.

He turned restlessly, thinking of his experience that day in the Joshua tree forest and of what Smith had said about the revenge of Joshua trees.

He got up, to look out the window. There was a full moon and the Joshua trees stood out in green-gold and inky shadow. He stared at them until they seemed to be moving in the deceptive moonlight, coming closer and bringing with them the alien coldness.

He muttered at the delusion and pulled the curtains shut. But after he got back in bed, he saw that the curtains were not fully closed, and it seemed to him he could still see them: slowly, stealthily, creeping closer.

He got up again and pulled down the window blind. But sleep was long in coming, and when it finally did he had nightmare dreams in which he was trying to learn what manner of execution they were planning for him.

As he was preparing to go to Red Rock the next morning, Smith said:

"A new will should be made, now that I know Mary is alive. You will definitely not be forgotten, I promise you."

"We should do that as soon as possible — as soon as you're strong enough for me to take you to town," he said. "For Mary's sake."

In Red Rock Derken bought four

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quarts of vodka, tomato juice, various fruit juices, and chocolate syrup. Vodka, when mixed in the proper proportion with any of these, would be undetectable.

When he got home, he said cheerfully to Smith:

"We're starting you on a new diet, old buddy. We want you strong when Mary gets here. I'm going to give you tomato juice, then bean soup flavored with bacon, then a big glass of chocolate milk."

He went into the kitchen where he determined by test exactly how much vodka he could add to everything without it being detectable by either taste or odor.

Smith dutifully drank everything, then talked of his eagerness to see Mary.

The hours dragged on in which there was nothing for him to do but fidget restlessly and try to calm his nerves with the thought that Smith could not live more than four more days.

Late in the afternoon he heard the rumble of thunder over the Joshua tree forest. A black cloud was there, lit by constant flashes of lightning; a cloud that had not been there two minutes before.

"One of them wants to die," Smith said.

"What wants to die?" he asked.

"A Joshua tree. Joshua trees can summon a sudden lightning storm anytime they want to."

"You're cra—" He heard the irritation in his own voice and said, "They can? But why should they want to?"

"To die; those that are old and know the end is near. Did you ever see a Joshua tree that had been struck by lightning? The inside will be a hollow black core, burned completely. If rain comes first, the dry leaves on the trunk will not be touched."

"How can it burn? The inside of a Joshua tree is fibrous, saturated with moisture."

"It does, somehow. And there is something else strange about a Joshua tree: I've seen lightning split the trunk of a pine wide open and tear off the limbs, but it will never do that to a Joshua tree. Lightning will burn out its heart, but it will never mutilate it."

He knew that Smith would be telling the truth.

"That's odd — but what a horrible way to die."

"Far better than the slow, painful way of dying of old age and infirmity, as I am dying now. There is no pain, with lightning."

"I see," he said, as though in agreement, and went to the kitchen to mix Smith a glass of spiked fruit juice.

It was not yet sundown when Smith complained of being tired. He helped Smith to his bedroom, then went to his own bedroom, where he looked through the travel folders.

He decided he would go to Paris, the Riviera, Rome, Hawaii — all of them.

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Smith had been up little more than an hour the next morning when he asked to be helped back to bed again. Derken continued to take spiked drinks to him throughout the day.

The next morning Smith could do no more than sit for a few minutes on the edge of his bed.

"I'm getting worse," he said. He took the glass of spiked tomato juice in both shaking hands, spilling part of it. "I was sure I would get better."

"You will," Derken assured him. "This is just a little relapse. Keep drinking what I bring you and you'll snap out of it."

At noon Smith called to him from his room.

"Something isn't working out right," he said in his panting voice. "If I keep on like this, I'll never make it until Tuesday. You had better phone Mary."

"I'll go to Red Rock and call her right now," he said.

In Red Rock he bought a bottle of American champagne — the only kind they had — and went back home.

"I called her," he told Smith. "She'll be in Las Vegas tomorrow night. I'll pick her up at the airport."

"Good. I know I can last that long."

"You will, old buddy, and a lot longer. Now I'll get you some orange juice."

The day dragged on. Night came, then another morning.

Smith was too weak to sit up in bed. He refused to drink anything but water.

"I'm awfully sick," he said. "And I'm afraid, Jake — I'm afraid that I'm farther gone than I thought. Every day, I've been getting worse, faster and faster, and my mind isn't clear, the way it should be. I'd think I was rum-dumb on whiskey, but I haven't been drinking any."

"Not over the relapse," Derken said. "You'll come out of it."

He went back into the living room and turned on the TV. But he could not become interested in it. He paced back and forth, wondering how many miles he had walked in the past few days. He wanted to go outside, but he did not dare to.

Try as he might, he could not convince himself that he was only imagining things.

He heard Smith call to him in the middle of the afternoon. He went in and saw that Smith would die before morning.

"I have to give up," Smith said in his weak, panting voice. "I refused to go to the hospital before — all they can do is delay the end. But now I want the end delayed — I want to see Mary before I die. You had better call an ambulance."

"I'll have one here as soon as possible," he said.

He drove partway to Red Rock, then turned around and went back home.

"I called," he said to Smith. "One

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will be here as soon as it gets back from another call."

He went into the living room and turned on the TV. The sound of it would keep him from hearing — the other. He began to pace back and forth.

Once, during the momentary silence of a program change, he heard Smith's feeble call:

"Jake — Jake —"

Then the new program blasted into life and drowned out all other sounds.

It was after dark when he went into Smith's room, not expecting him to be alive.

But he was, his eyes abnormally bright in his ash-grey face, his breathing a fast, shallow panting.

"The end of the trail." Smith tried to smile, a ghastly travesty of a smile. "It looks like you succeeded, Jake."

"I don't understand —"

"A few hours ago, I finally started thinking — too late. This getting worse every day, so fast — I should have realized what was going on, but I was a fool who trusted you.

"What have you been giving me?"

"Joe! You know how hard I've worked to help you —"

"Yes ... how well I know how hard you've worked. And I know you have never phoned Mary and I know you didn't phone for an ambulance. And the letters Mary and I wrote to each other — how many did you have to destroy?"

"Joe, you —"

"The new will reads that it is made with the assumption, not the knowledge, that Mary is dead. Do you remember?"

"I— I—"

"You remember. And it's been worrying you. Half a million dollars — so near, yet so far. I've been wondering why you have been so nervous lately. Now I know. You're running scared, old buddy — you're running scared."

"How can you think —"

"You planned very well, didn't you? But you will die when what you have killed me to get is almost in your hand. You will die in screaming terror.

"A hell of a way to die, isn't it?" There was taunting mockery in Smith's eyes. "A hell of a way to die, old buddy...."

Smith went limp, as though he had exhausted the very last of his strength to speak his final words. His eyes closed, and when Derken spoke to him he did not seem to hear.

He tried to find Smith's pulse. There was none.

He phoned the resident deputy sheriff.

The next day he made arrangements for Smith's funeral, saw Smith's lawyer about probation of the will, and was assured he would be appointed administrator of Smith's estate.

When he went back home he parked his car on the side of the house away from the carport — away from the Joshua tree that had been the first to show a dislike for him.

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He had to park on the south side of an old Joshua tree which was leaning a little to the south, as so many of them did. They would usually be leaning a little or have most of their limbs on the south side.

Always to the south and never any other direction. He wondered if Smith would have known why.

It was after dark that night, while he was reading a travel magazine, that he felt a chill permeating the living room. The magazine fell from his hands as he looked at the windows, black and vacant from the darkness outside, and realized what it was.

The Joshua trees were crowded together, just outside his windows, watching him.

He knew, with absolute logic, that they were actually out in the yard, where they had always been. But the sensation of being watched was so strong that he went to his bedroom and locked the door after him.

The next day, well before dark, he used blankets to improvise blinds for all the windows and the door.

From then on, the improvised blinds remained in place, day and night, and he never turned off the TV even though he never watched it.

Something else began to bother him more and more.

It seemed to him he could remember hearing a childlike wail of pain when he killed the baby Joshua tree. The memory kept becoming stronger as the days and weeks went by.

One day in Red Rock, he met fat, gooseberry-eyed Gabby Gorman, who had the reputation of knowing everybody's business and telling everything he knew.

"I hear that Smith left you a fortune," Gabby said.

"It was a surprise to me," he answered. "But I wish he had had a relative to leave the money to — I don't need it."

"He didn't have no kin, huh?"

"Absolutely no one."

Once, when he had had several drinks before leaving for Las Vegas, he decided to take the short-cut through the Joshua tree forest. He did not go far before he stopped, with the feeling that he was driving into a trap.

He turned around and went by way of Red Rock.

Spring made its full appearance. The Joshua trees in his yard put forth large greenish-white blossoms. Between them grew a profusion of wildflowers; crimson four-o' clocks, flaming Indian Paint Brush, purple lupine, bright golden poppies....

But they were of no interest to him, as they would have been to his wife....

Monday of the last week finally came. The will would be probated on Wednesday.

He stayed up late that night, drinking champagne and thinking of all the places he would go and all the things he would do, a future that once had been only wishful dreaming because of lack of money.

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He awoke later than he intended the next day, but a glance at his watch showed him that he would have plenty of time to go to Las Vegas, if necessary.

He drank coffee, shaved, and put on his best suit. He went outside, to go to his car, and stopped in disbelief.

During the night the Joshua tree had fallen across his car. One of the heavy limbs had the trunk lid pinned down — and his hand-ax was in the trunk.

He used a butcher knife to slowly, laboriously, hack the limb off. He was sweating and cursing when he could finally open the trunk and get to his hand-ax. But the small ax was dull, and it was much later when he had managed to cut through the tree trunk in two different places and free his car.

Dangerously later in the day, all because of a Joshua tree....

There was one letter in his box at the Red Rock post office, a letter from Mary Weston to her grandfather. With a feeling of premonition, he opened it.

She expressed the usual concern over her grandfather but the last sentence struck him like a physical blow:

...I have saved some money from the insurance Daddy and Mama left me. If I don't hear from you in a very few days, I'm going to hire a Colorado private detective to trace you from the rest home address....

"Hello, Jake."

It was Gabby Gorman.

"Was Smith's friend out to your place?" Gabby asked.

He felt his heart lurch and he asked with a mouth suddenly gone dry:

"Smith's friend?"

"Yeah. A feller was in the store this mornin', askin' all about him. I told him Smith stayed at your place a long time before he died and that you couldn't find no kin of his'n to give all that money to that Smith willed you."

"Did—" He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. "Did he say anything about himself?"

"Nope. But I see by his license plate that he was drivin' a Colorado car."

Colorado — the private detective!

He had probably already phoned Mary Weston and told her all he had learned.

He ran out to his car, his tires screaming as he left.

He would have to go home, first. The bank might want proof that he was administrator of the estate — the joint account might not be enough.

It required only seconds for him to get what he wanted at his house; then he was on his way again. He would take the short-cut through the Joshua tree forest — there was no time to go by the long route through Red Rock. He would, at best, get to Las Vegas only a few minutes before the bank closed.

As soon as he got the money, he would take the first eastbound jet, Switzerland his destination. Once he had the money safely deposited in a

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Swiss bank — a beautiful half million dollars — Mary Weston could never touch a cent of it.

He was already to the place where he had turned back the first time when he realized there was no longer a sensation of menace in the Joshua tree forest. The Joshua trees were only Joshua trees, standing immobile and harmless.

So it had been all the time, he realized. There was nothing mysterious or planned about anything that had happened. Even the Joshua tree that had fallen across his car — it was old and already leaning toward the south. A hard gust of wind had blown it the rest of the way down.

All of his fears had been only his imagination, caused by the nervous strain of waiting for Smith to die.

He had only one worry: to get the money out of the bank before Smith's granddaughter did something to prevent it.

He was driving as fast as the winding road would permit, pleased with his simple, logical explanation, when he heard thunder above the sound of his car.

A black cloud had suddenly appeared. It was coming close behind him, moving swiftly and overtaking him, lit by almost constant flashes of lightning.

The comfort he had derived from logic began to waver. He increased his speed and almost lost control on the next curve.

The cloud was coming faster than he had ever seen a cloud move, pushed by a hard wind that had not existed a minute or two before.

There was something wrong....

It seemed to him he again heard Smith say:

Joshua trees can summon a sudden lightning storm anytime they want to.

He tried to put the question from his mind:

Was the thundercloud hurrying onward in obedience to the command of some Joshua tree ahead?

He came to the sharp curve where the old Joshua tree stood. The sight of it brought another question:

Was this the Joshua tree that had summoned the lightning?

He knew, with cold and certain fear, that it was.

He stared at it, feeling like a man hypnotized. He saw that eight feet of its top had broken off and he saw — and wondered why he should attach any importance to it — that it had no blossoms. It could never reproduce again — and he had killed its last child....

He felt the berm alongside the road catch his right front wheel. The car swerved, the steering wheel spinning out of his hands. The berm caught the other wheel, and he knew he was going to flip over.

There was a confused impression of earth and sky revolving over him, a scraping feeling as he was thrown out where a door had snapped open, a jar

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as he hit the ground, something hard against his back and something pressing down upon his legs.

Then it was over. He was sitting on the ground, his back against the Joshua tree and his legs pinned under his overturned car.

His legs were not injured — the sand had served as a cushion. But they were firmly pinned under the car, and it would require time to dig out.

Time — and the bank would soon close.

He began scooping at the sand under his legs, frantic in his urgency. The bank would soon close —

Thunder crashed deafeningly and lightning slashed at something a short distance away. The first drops of rain spattered on him.

He knew, then, that it would never matter to him when the bank closed.

He would be dead.

And he knew how he was going to die and why the Joshua trees were watching him with an objective lack of emotion.

He had been tried and found guilty. Sentence had been passed upon him.

They were waiting, now, to witness his execution.

Waiting, purple lupine and golden poppies at their feet, silently waiting to watch him die....

His fear became terror. He saw the baby Joshua tree he had killed, its leaves yellow and its little roots dry and withered by the sun. His terror increased.

The Joshua tree spoke to him in his mind:

I am old and it is time for me to die. I had a child who would have grown up to be tall and strong, as I used to be — but you killed my child — my last and only child.

He tore at his collar, panting for breath. He was going to die, and he wanted to live —

The Joshua tree spoke again; cold, implacable:

You killed my last and only child.

He tried with all his strength to free his legs, clawing at the sand and whimpering like an animal. Voices came to him; vividly, terribly clear.

The voice of Smith's granddaughter; young and pleading:

Please write to me, Grandpa — I love you so much and you are all I have left, now....

The broken voice of Smith:

I want to see Mary before I die....

The other voice of Smith as he was dying: contemptuous, mocking:

You're running scared, old buddy....

A hell of a way to die, isn't it?....

A hell of a way to die, old buddy....

And there was another sound, a sound without words, like the pain-filled cry of a dying child.

Lightning struck a hundred feet away, stabbing repeatedly. He knew that it was coming again, at the targets it could not miss.

He threw up his hands, as though

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to ward it off. He screamed, a scream that was choked with terror. He screamed again, his last conscious moment that of indescribable horror as the lightning engulfed him and the tree and the car in crashing, blazing violence.

The lightning stopped, leaving the Joshua tree as it had wanted to be and leaving something torn and unrecognizable below it.

The thunder faded into silence. The black cloud paled swiftly and was suddenly no more. The desert wind calmed to a gentle whispering. The sun shone again from a clear blue sky.

The purple lupine and golden poppies nodded under the warm sun. The Joshua trees returned to their eons-old dreaming. Somewhere, out among them, a bird was singing.

And somewhere, far away in Montana, a girl was on a jet bound for Las Vegas.

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Here is the incredible account of one of the 21st Century's most successful home appliances: a lethal piece of robot machinery designed to scare the crap out of any looter, rapist or housebreaker. Even the way it talks is frightening.

Steele Wyoming

BY
RON GOULART

We were sitting around in the ruins, talking about what we used to be.

Six or seven of us sprawled around a cook fire in Gramercy Slum. Popsicle Pete was showing off again, using the metal fingers on his cyborg hand as skewers. It was a warm spring night, the smell of roasting dog meat was pleasant. Frisco Phil had been claiming he'd been the governor of Cal North back in 2017.

"Still be," he maintained, "if they hadn't got my home computer to turn state's evidence."

"Never trust a machine," observed Meltdown out of one of his mouths. "It's mankind's overdependence on things mechanical that's put the world in the sorry shape it is today, mates."

"I'll tell you machine that's a pain in the toke," I said. "Those godamn Steele Wyoming guardbots. Now whenever you try to raid an Inside sub you've got to—"

"Basically Steele Wyoming is a brilliant concept," broke in Otto Norkin. He was a middlesized man, late twenties, still a bit plump and his clothes not too shabby. We figured he hadn't been Outside more than a few months.

"How's that?" asked Popsicle Pete, eyes on the sizzling chunks of dog flesh stuck to his fingers.

"I'm probably a little prejudiced." Norkin shifted on the pile of apartment house rubble he was sitting on. "See, I invented Steele Wyoming."

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Meltdown out of his ear.

"The guy who invented Steele Wyoming ought to be richer than a Cal North governor," suggested Frisco Phil, "richer even than a subliminal-rock multibillionaire."

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"I sort of screwed up," admitted Norkin.

"Same like me." Meltdown scratched at his largest nose. "The world as it exists today is dedicated to the oppression of the individual, most especially the different individual. In my own case —"

"Skuff your case," said Popsicle Pete. "I want to hear how come Norkin isn't a multibillionaire."

"It's an interesting story," said Norkin quietly.

"So tell us," I invited.

"Could we maybe eat first?" he asked. "This has been a rough day, I haven't been able to—"

"Sure, here." Popsicle Pete flipped a hunk of dog meat off his thumb and Norkin caught it. "Any multibillionaire in the crowd gets first choice."

"Tastes pretty good." He chewed rapidly.

"It's the wild oregano gives it zing," Popsicle Pete told him. "You can make almost anything taste nifty with oregano, except possibly park squirrel."

"I'm anxious to hear your account of how you invented one of the 21st Century's most successful home appliances," urged Frisco Phil.

Wiping his lips on his barely tacky sleeve, Norkin inquired, "Are there going to be seconds?"

"Nope."

This was a year or so ago (Norkin began, after a wistful glance at the cooking meat) and I was living in a 5-bubble domehouse in the Westport Enclave. My home laboratory took up one whole bubble, had an energy bill of $4000 per month. Since I was on a nice retainer to National Robot & Android the expense of anything didn't much worry me.

I was distracted that particular afternoon. Up on the bluff above me, in a 13-bubble mansion, lived that subrock multibillionaire, Leapfrog. He and his band were rehearsing yet again. I couldn't hear their godawful music, nobody hears subrock. I was feeling it, though, and my bones and inner workings were vibrating in unsettling ways.

While I was striding over to the pixphone to phone in a complaint to the Inside Suburban Standards Patrol the call button flashed.

"Hello?" I left the pixscreen blank, because ever since I'd started complaining about Leapfrog there'd been a lot of lewd images beamed at me. Bare buttocks, gross breasts, other things.

"Otto, I'm in desperate trouble!"

Recognizing the musical voice as that of Beverly Bell, I unblanked. She looked absolutely lovely, even though ducked behind a plexidesk with only the tousled top of her redhaired head showing. "What the hell's wrong?"

"I'm being beseiged."

I made an exasperated noise. "You're over in Southport, huh?"

"My work in Zapbug compels me to visit —"

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"You know damn well, Beverly, that they haven't got sufficient security to take —"

"Be that as it may, darling, there are fifteen Poverty Commandos from the Bridgeport Dregs riding around this particular pest-infested mansion on aircycles," she breathlessly explained. "Looting and, possibly, rape is what they have in mind."

"Could be you're exaggerating their intent—"

"Otto, they've been announcing their intentions over bullhorns for the past ten minutes and more."

"And the Southport police?"

"Have me on their waiting list. There are a lot of raids today, maybe it's the warm weather, and it may take —"

"Okay, give me the address of the damn place and I'll be right over."

"You're sure this isn't going to take you away from your work?"

"Sure it is, but I happen to love you. Come on, the address."

She blurted it out, hung up.

After loading some trial antipersonnel devices into my skycar, I zoomed off for Southport.

There were fifteen of them circling the lucite saltbox mansion when I came whizzing across the hazy afternoon sky, a mixture of Poverty Commandos and Suicide Cadets. Another dozen of the SC youths were sprawled unconscious around the security shed in front of the one acre estate's now nonfunctioning force wall. Obviously they'd been able to disable the mansion's entire secsystem before it stunned them out of the fight.

I decided to give the scruffy raiding party a chance. Setting my glossy crimson skycar on a low circle pattern, I grabbed my pubmike.

"You folks don't know me, but I'm a well-known freelance Research & Design consultant for NRA," I announced out of the multispeakers in the belly of my circling car. "With me this afternoon I have one of the more formidable robot gadgets I've been tinkering with and —"

Blap!

One of them had aimed a sewbazoo gun at me, sending an unpleasant wad of raw sewage rocketing up to stick to the underside of my flying vehicle.

"Snarf you, wiseass!"

"Up your gupp!"

"Blow it out your keezby!"

"All right, since you won't listen to reason I—"

Blap!

I activated the antipersonnel missile launcher I had finished hooking up only the day before. A faint, and gratifying, hum commenced.

Zip!

Zip!

Zip!

Three of my robot minimissiles went shooting out of the scarlet nose of the skycar. Though each was less than six inches in length, it contained enough pacifying serum to render even

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the most belligerent unemployed hooligan out cold for an hour or more.

As I'd expected each bright projectile found a lout and stuck its sharp nose into unwashed flesh.

Zip!

Zip!

Zip!

I launched another salvo of my robot missiles and was gratified to see three more would-be looters tumble to the estate's immaculate fakgraz lawn.

The third round gave me a surprise. When the second missile found its target, a hefty black young man in a purple kilsuit, it malfunctioned. Instead of injecting him with a harmless tranquilizing drug, it proceeded to bore a large hole clean through his body.

Blood came gushing out, spraying across the afternoon. The remaining attackers panicked when they saw that, making one angry upward swing toward my circling skycar. They yowled at me, a mutant in the pack flashed me several middle fingers, and then they went droning away on their multicolor cycles.

Landing, I ran first to the body of the black man.

"...dirty muffer," he was babbling, blood all over him. "...usin' 'vanced technology on starvin' Outsiders...."

"Actually," I tried to explain as I genuflected beside him, "these minimissiles you saw used here today are still in the experimental stage. If you guys hadn't provoked me into rushing to rescue the —"

"Rescue my biffy! You up an' killed me, muffer ... graveyard dead...."

It was true, those were his last words.

"Best to look at it statistically," I found myself saying to the corpse. "I used nine of them and only one malfunctioned. Using industry safety standards we could say—"

"Otto, what are you doing?"

There was Beverly Bell framed in the lucite doorway. Absolutely beautiful in her black, lacetrimmed l-piece thighslit worksuit with the Zapbug patch over her pretty left breast.

"Apologizing." I backed away from the dead looter, trotted up the thermal path to her. "That unfortunate guy got a —"

"Unfortunate? He's the one who was the most vocal when it came to suggesting what insulting intimacies they had planned for my body," she said, pretty nose wrinkling. "I don't know if you've ever had detailed sexual threats boomed at you over loudspeakers in the middle of the day, Otto, but I can assure—"

"Never mind, the ordeal's over." I slid an arm around her slim waist, kissed her cheek. "The important thing is ... yow!"

"Otto, darling, what is it?"

Letting go of her, I doubled up and jammed my hands over my ears. "You've ... got the ... damn thing ... turned on!" I managed to groan.

"Otto, the sonicgun only affects cockroaches and glazbugs. Really. We

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at Zapbug guarantee the frequency is such that it can't possibly —"

"Turn the frapping thing off!"

Giving me a disappointed pout, she spun and ran back inside the mansion.

Gradually I was able to straighten up. "You have to go into some new line of work, Bev," I told her as she returned.

She had a slightly contrite smile on her face. "Extermination is my chosen career, Otto. Until I—"

"Besides doing me frequent and serious internal damage with those sonic buguns of yours," I told her, "you're also in a field of endevour that only pays you $150,000 a year. You'll never —"

"We've already kicked this around. When you have $25,000,000 saved away, Otto, then I'll consider abandoning my career, one I devoted four years at the Harvard School of Pest Control to preparing for," she said, lips firm. "By the way, was that your new robot minimissile you used on these goons? Seems to me it didn't quite work the way you —"

"Eight out of nine, that's a damn good percentage." I gestured at the Poverty Commandos dazed on the bright green lawn. "Once I get the last of the kinks worked out, NRA'll grab it up for —"

"Sure, and pay you a dinky $250,000 for all rights."

"Bev, that's the way the invention business works," I said, struggling with my temper. "I can't make the devices on a mass scale and peddle 'em myself. So I have to work with an outfit like National Robot & Android. Granted the dough isn't what it could be, but they're fairer than —"

"A dinky quarter of a million and a 10% royalty, and for that you have to threaten to take 'em to court." She tossed her stunning red hair. "That crowd control andy you invented for them last year has already earned 94 million bucks and I hear some new African nation is going to buy another six hundred of them to replace the royal army."

"I've only seen about six million in royalties, Bev, so that means —"

"Means they're screwing you, Otto."

I sighed. "Maybe so, but —"

Bev looked me in the eye. "What you ought to do is build a gaget that'd scare the crap out of Poverty Commandos and all those other —"

"Beverly!" I put my hands on her lovely slim shoulders. "You're absolutely right."

All at once, standing there with that lovely redheaded girl before me, I'd had a vision. I saw Steele Wyoming.

In less than a month of relatively feverish work I had the Steele Wyoming prototype completed.

Carlos Trinidad came rushing over at once from National Robot & Android when I told him what I had.

He was a handsome man, tall, wide-

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shouldered, dark, not quite thirty five. Perfectly designed teeth, wavy and believable synhair. He came into my lab bobbing oddly from side to side, hands wiggling in the air.

"Feeling ill, Carlos?"

He gave me a perfect smile. "It's the music, amigo."

So engrossed had I been these past weeks, I'd become oblivious to Leapfrog's aggressive subrock music. "I'll pix the bastard and —"

"No, no, I like it, amigo," Carlos insisted. "Now show me this new guardbot of yours."

"Over here." To heighten the suspense a little I'd draped a tablecloth over the large android. Walking toward the pedestal now I noticed a splotch of butsub on the cloth. I put myself between the smear and the NRA Project Development chief and whipped off the cloth. "I call him Steele Wyoming."

Carlos chuckled. "He's very impressive, amigo."

"Designed to scare the crap out of any looter, rapist, housebreaker or other unwanted Outsider."

"Steele Wyoming, huh? Catchy."

"A cowboy name." I'd gotten butsub on my fingers somehow. Wiping them on the plyocloth, I tossed it aside and one of my little servobots came scooting over to gather it up.

Carlos, slowly, circled Steele Wyoming. "I assume he's lethal as well as frightening?"

"Tell him, Steele."

"First off, let me say howdy, Mr. Trinidad, sir," drawled the big android in his rumbling Old West voice. He reached a huge horny hand up to tip his highcrown stetson. "I kin be lethal or I kin merely stun varmints. Depends on how the nice folks who owns me wants the deal to go down."

Carlos laughed, pleased. "He's terrific, amigo."

"What I figured," I said while Carlos stood gazing up at the seven foot tall cowboy android, "is that to a great many people in America, even in this year of 2020, the cowboy remains a symbol of honesty, dedication, law and order."

Steele adjusted his hat on his head. "That is surely true."

"National Robot & Android can sell a Steele Wyoming to just about every Insider family in America that's worried about home security," I said. "With unemployment hitting 40% in the country right now and the Outsider raids getting worse and worse, the Insider class is going to love an appliance like this, Carlos. What I see him as is the ultimate home safeguard."

"Explain a little more, amigo."

"Lemme handle this part of the palaver," offered the big android, scratching his handsome chin. "See, sir, Otto here got to thinkin' as how most secsystems can be futzed by dedicated and patient looters, special iffen they don't mind a few of their ranks gettin' killed off. But with me in your house, it don't matter what they

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do to your security setup. Cause when they's inside they got to face up to me, an' I am absolutely impregnable and unfutzable. Think about how secure that'll make your average home. No matter what them Outsider galoots try, I'm gonna be there to meet 'em iffen they get inside." He held up his left hand. "I got me a built in stunrod in this here finger, pacifyin' gas in this un. I got a laser in the pinky what'll slice the biggest toughest Poverty Commando clean in half. I got a multitude of other weapons and repellents built inter me, besides which I got a pair of sixguns." He whirled them out of his silvertrimmed holsters, fired four shots up into the domed ceiling of my plexilab.

"Steele," I cautioned, "remember what I told you about shooting those off indoors!"

"I plumb forgot. Please accept my—"

The pixphone had started flashing.

I trotted over to answer. "Yes?"

"Anymore noise down there, nurfball, and I call in the—"

"Go scaf yourself!" I killed the connection.

"Was that that ornery Leapfrog polecat? I recognized his slurpy voice."

"He claims gunfire spoils their concentra—"

"Got me half a mind to hightail it up there an'—"

"Whoa now, Steele."

Carlos' face showed a frown starting. "He is controlable, isn't he?"

"Sure, docile as a lamb."

"Dang right," affirmed Steele. "Cept when my dander gets—"

"Remember this is only the prototype," I was quick to point out to the NRA man. "Once I get the last few kinks worked out, Steele° will be perfect. He works on vocal command, and only accredited voices can control him."

"Got me a voiceprint reader smack next to my ticker." The android cowboy whapped himself on his broad chest.

Turning away, Carlos started pacing my lab. "We ought to be able to sell a million of these things the first year, Otto," he said. "Steele Wyoming. With the right push from our sales staff and the ad people everybody'll recognize him as the answer to all security fears. It's terrific, amigo."

I coughed. "How much?"

"This is such a sensational gadget, Otto, I'm sure I can get you $300,000 in front and a 12% royal—"

"$500,000 and 15%."

"Listen, amigo, they may not stand—"

"I'm anxious to start a more complex relationship with Beverly Bell. I need to...."

"Sure, I know: She told me."

"When'd you see her?"

He grinned. "We had a little cucaracha problem at our New Greenwich plant, amigo, and I sent for Zapbug," he told me. "Don't know how those little rascals got into our Simula-

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tion Wing but there they were. Bev did a terrific job of —"

"Lemme put in my two cents." Steele leaned from his pedestal, reached over to tap Carlos on the shoulder. "I'd be right happy iffen you saw to it Otto got him that half a million. Okay?"

Carlos said, "I'll see what I can do."

Things were going smoothly until Steele killed Leapfrog.

Carlos Trinidad had been able to persuade NRA to advance $500,000 on Steele Wyoming. The total contract wasn't quite what I wanted, but the extra money somewhat compensated. I had to turn over ownership to the whole cowboy guardbot concept to National Robot & Android. I signed the contract.

It was the evening of the day before I was due to deliver the Steele Wyoming prototype together with all my plans and talktapes to NRA's New Greenwich plant. Carlos promised me I'd get my total advance check the minute the last of the turnover forms were processed.

That afternoon, since Beverly Bell had been zapping a mansion in Westport, we'd met for a brief lunch at the Mock Vegetarian Restaurant on the Saugatuck Fillin Mall. There'd been a small incident while I was wishing her goodbye on the running board of her bugvan. She'd left one of her damn sonicguns on and before I could even press my lips to her lovely cheek I bent over with severe stomach cramps.

"But, Otto, darling, it only bothers cockroaches," she'd insisted.

"Meaning?"

Well, we'd eventually smoothed the argument out. I was still a little unsettled, though, when I let myself in through my self-designed multisecurity system and into my house.

There was an odd smell in the air. Gunsmoke.

"Steele?" I started running along the connectube to the labdome. "What in the hell have—"

I saw Leapfrog sprawled on the pedestal where Steele Wyoming was supposed to be standing. The subrock multimillionaire was flat on his back, making a flabby X. The chest of his 1-piece spungold funsuit was scribbled with blood and there were several holes showing in him.

Behind me I heard whistling.

Steele had brought in a tuberocker from the recdome. He was rocking gently back and forth, one of his sixguns resting on his thigh. "Warn't goin' to let him say that about you, Otto."

"Say what? You mean you—"

"Dang polecat showed up whilses you was out with your ladyfriend. Demanded to talk with you. Claimed as how all this gunshootin' was—"

"What gunshooting?"

"Wellsir, I get bored sometimes an' some target—"

"No, nope, not at all. You can't get bored, I didn't build that into you," I

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told him. "And how the hell'd Leapfrog get in here?"

"I let the varmint in. I mean, he said as how we'd have to have us a man to man talk."

"You're not a man, you're a machine. Now you've gone and murdered one of the country's best known subrock multibillionaires."

"Were a fair fight, a shootout." Steele nodded his impressive head toward the body.

Beside it now I noticed a blaster pistol. "He was going to shoot you?"

"Original he was gonna shoot you, pard."

"You're not supposed to do things like this, Steele," I told him, skirting the body and approaching his rocker. "Tomorrow I have to deliver you to NRA in tiptop shape."

"Gonna miss you, Otto."

"I need the money. It's going to help me get together with Beverly Bell in a more—"

"There's another thing that ornery skunk tried to lie about," said my cowboy android. "Tried to claim him and your nice ladyfriend had been foolin' around on the sly ever since she zapped his termites way last —"

"What?"

"Exactly how I reacted, Otto. I'm right sure she's as faithful as the driven snow."

"Bev and Leapfrog?"

"That's what he claimed. Nother reason to shoot him, to my way athinkin'."

I took a deep breath. "Just another of his attempts to annoy me," I decided. "Like the bare buttocks on the pix-screen. Now we have to figure out what to tell the police. When they get here, Steele, leave out any mention of Beverly and simply—"

"We don't have to tell them law waddies nothin', pard."

"Nothing? Hell, I've got a dead subrock multibillionaire smack in the middle of my lab."

"Suppose we waits till nightfall an' then I dispose of Leapfrog somewheres away from hereabouts? I kin make it look like he was a victim of an Outsider gang."

I shook my head. "If only he weren't so well known, this'd be good publicity. Steele Wyoming takes care of intruder, that sort of thing. But Leapfrog is a—"

"Police come trompin' in here, they jist might lock you an' me up, buckaroo. Put me under observation or somethin'. Won't be no way nohow we kin get to NRA tomorrow."

I glanced from the slowly rocking android cowboy to the corpse. "You can do it? Get rid of him without linking it to us?"

"Didn't you build me smart, Otto? Ain't I jist about the brightest andy ever come down the pike?"

"You are, if I do say so, Steele."

"Then jist relax an' leave this to me."

I nodded. "Let's put a tablecloth over him until it get dark," I said.

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* * *

"Shucks," said Steele Wyoming.

I sat upright, quite suddenly, in my sleep pit. I'd been asleep for only a few minutes. Blinking, I saw him looming above me at the rim of my pit. "What, what?" I leaped off my floating repozpad. "Did you arrange things?"

"Sure," he drawled. "But...."

Scooting up the ladder, I said, "But?"

"Aw, I had to ... well, sort of shoot a few police waddies."

"Police waddies? You shot Westport cops?"

"Naw, they was Connecticut Highway Militia, judging by the insignias I seen on their remains."

"Steele, you know you're not supposed to kill anyone unless your master's life is in danger." My voice was rising. "I designed you that way. Don't you realize you're the forerunner of a whole line of absolutely safe and reliable home—"

"These here fellas was gonna put your life in danger." Steele pushed up his wide stetson brim with a thumb. "See, when I was sinkin' that there Leapfrog hombre in the midnight waters of the Long Island Sound with lots of zeement brix attached to him, these three cop fellas come a-zippin' down for a looksee."

"Three?" I sank to a sitting possition, legs dangling over into the pit. "You knocked off three people tonight?"

"Four actual, Otto. Nother fella joined 'em when they was —"

"Couldn't you have stunned then, using your ... whichever finger it is?"

"Stun 'em an' they wakes up again eventual," he pointed out in his rumbling voice. "One of these jokers said, 'Hey, that must be one of them experimental androids that there Otto Norkin fella whips up.' An' another one pipes up with, 'How come he's a-dumpin' a subrock multibillionaire into the moonlit waters of the —'"

"Okay, okay." I stood up, put a hand on his arm. "We'll lie low tonight and then in the morning I'll take you to NRA and that's it. Once we're holed up someplace safe, I'll make a few minor adjustments and you'll be shipshape," I said. "Better not stay here, though, just in case. We'll hide out someplace else and I'll get the last of those flaws removed."

"Ain't no flaw standin' up for you," Steele assured me.

It was a mistake going to Beverly Bell's at one in the morning. But I was rattled some, and assumed Steele and I could stay there safely until morning. Quite probably no one was going to come looking at my lab anyway, since the android cowboy had done away with everyone who might identify him.

Once I got him adjusted and delivered to National Robot & Android I'd get the check. I planned to cash it, then head for a long vacation in Latin America. I intended asking Bev to share that with me.

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"Oh, goodness," she said when she looked out her spyhole and saw us on her plyomat.

After some fiddling, she got the door open and I noted she was clad only in a frilly neorayon nitegarment. It had the Zapbug insignia over the left breast.

"Evenin', miss." Steele tipped his sombrero politely.

"Bev, I'm in sort of..." I dropped my tool kit, doubled up and clamped my hands over my ears. "Turn your sonicgun off, Bev!"

"Why it's Otto Norkin, as I live and breathe," she said much too loudly.

"Stop yelling and turn the damn thing off," I suggested, grimacing with pain.

"If I do that, Otto, the cockroaches and the doodlebugs may well start running wild in my cozy little 3-bubble cottage."

"Why are you ... talking so loud?"

"Doggone!" said Steele. "There's a surenough prowler a-climbin' assfirst out yonder winder." He whipped out both sixguns, went stomping across Bev's small neograz lawn.

"Otto, tell him it isn't exactly a prowler," said Bev as she shoved me off the threshold.

The effect of the cockroach beam subsided. "Huh?" I was able to say.

"Don't get angry," she said, "but I have a guest tonight. He decided to slip away rather than have a possible frumus with you which might lead to—"

Blam!

Blam!

"Steele!"

Blam!

I sprinted to where he was standing over a fallen figure.

Steele blew a whisp of smoke away from the barrel of his sixgun. Spun it, returned it to its holster. He did the same with the second authentic-looking gun. "There's one more owlhoot who won't—"

"Holy Christ!" I got a look at the latest victim in the light spilling out of Bev's bedpod.

It was Carlos Trinidad, nearly dressed and absolutely dead.

"Otto, your stupid mechanical man has killed someone I was quite fond of."

"You?" I turned to her. "You and Carlos?"

"I'm fond of you as well, Otto, really."

"And you and Leapfrog?"

"A girl can be fond of more than two people, after all. This is the 21st Century we dwell in, so we have to have an up to the minute—"

"Never mind, never mind." All at once I only wanted to get away from there.

Get away before she told me who else she might be fond of. Before Steele Wyoming shot anybody else. Before the police arrived.

I ran, leaped into my skycar and went roaring up into the night.

When there was no more sign of In-

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side civilization below me I landed. It was the Central Park Jungle and within fifteen minutes they'd stripped my machine, taken most of my money and banxchitz and my tool kit.

Didn't much bother me. I had realized I really wasn't suited for Inside life. I just want to be Outside for a while....

"There are millions of those Steele Wyoming guardbots on the market now," said Meltdown out of his largest mouth. "Think of the royalties that must be piling up for you."

Norkin shrugged. "Let NRA keep them."

Popsicle Pete licked animal fat off his metal forefinger.

"They must have taken over that prototype of yours after you cleared out, Otto."

"Suppose they did," he said. "Contract gave them that right."

"But it was unreliable," said Meltdown. "Prone to do sudden and unexpected violence."

"I'll give that to NRA, they really seem to have worked out the kinks in Steele Wyoming before they started mass marketing him," said Norkin. "Far as I know....".

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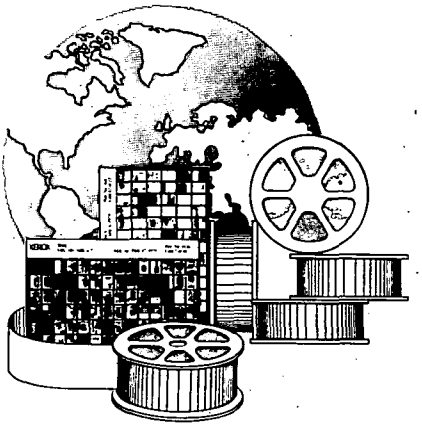

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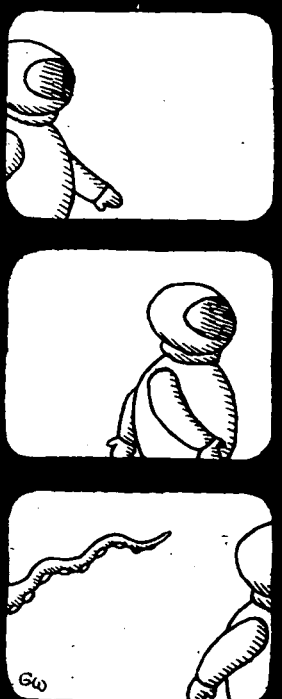

AN ENGLISHMAN'S CASTLE

Long time readers will know that I only head the column with the title of whatever I'm reviewing when it's something pretty special. *An Englishman's Castle* is a three-part teleplay produced in England, and it is, indeed, something special.

The alternate world story appears often enough to be recognized as a subgenre of science fiction, but it is still infrequent, probably because it requires a strong knowledge of history as well as everything else needed for turning out good s/f. Curiously enough, I've run across three examples in the last month, two literary, one on TV.

The novels are both good in their way; Phyllis Eisenstein's *Shadow of Earth* is about an alternate time in which the Spanish Armada won, and Richard Meredith's *At the Narrow Passage*, one in which the British Empire dominates (among others; it's an across-the-time-streams concept).

But *An Englishman's Castle* had them both beat in intelligence and subtlety; I bring this up not to put down the two books, but as worthy of note simply because it happens so seldom that the science fiction screen comes out ahead of the science fiction printed word — *especially* in intelligence and subtlety.

An Englishman's Castle takes place

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in the 1970s in Britain, in a world where Germany has won World War II. This, of course, has been done before, in Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Sarban's *The Sound of His Horn*, among others. On this Earth, in this particular England, life seems prosperous in a Europe dominated by Germany; there are no Storm Troopers goose-stepping around the streets, no swastikas or pictures of Hitler. The BBC still exists, turning out programs that are shown all over Europe. In fact, one ongoing series having to do with the British resistance to the invasion of England in 1940 is an enormous hit. A sort of prime time soap opera, it's called *An Englishman's Castle*, and is written and directed by one Peter Ingram.

Ingram is politically very correct. Having fought valiantly in the English/German conflict, he laid down his arms at the "armistice" and has gone with the government ever since. He has a dull wife, two sons in their early 20s, and a young mistress who is also an actress on his show.

However, a series of events is unleashed by Ingram's desire to introduce a character named Rosenthal into the series as a tribute to a long dead comrade in the war. His boss at the network, brilliantly portrayed as a classic slimy corporation type, keeps saying things like "It's your decision, of course," but is obviously going to have no Jews in the script. Ingram is obdurate and comes home that night to find his youngest son being taken by the secret police as a member of the violent, revolutionary underground.

Ingram contacts his superior and, in a bargain not stated as a bargain, agrees to change the new character's name to something harmlessly Anglo-Saxon if his son is released. Bitterly disillusioned, he is ripe for recruitment by his mistress for the real underground, much more subtle and widespread than the violent fringe that tosses bombs, who are tolerated and even promoted by the German-dominated government because they alienate the average citizen.

This is only the bare bones of a plot that works wonderfully on the thriller level, and which climaxes (I can give this much away, I think) with the necessity for Ingram to work into his script the words which will be the signal for all of England to rise against the current puppet government.

Despite the nifty plotting, though, it's the intelligence that has gone into the background and production that makes *An Englishman's Castle* so fine.

As an example, the costumes and sets all have a dowdy, slightly dated look, close to that of the 1940s. Obviously in this time line, there would have been no '60s cultural revolution, no "swinging England," no Beatles. Rooms and people *would* look different.

And in the writing, there are thrown-away lines such as the one to the effect that the country's economy is sound as a bell. A bitter touch indeed,

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considering the comparative economies of England and West Germany today.

I would like to name everyone associated with this extraordinary production, but will have to suffice with that finest and steadiest of British actors, Kenneth More, as Ingram, Isla Blair as the mistress and Kathleen Byron as the wife. It was written by Philip Mackie and directed by Paul Ciappessoni.

If, by the way, you don't recall *An Englishman's Castle* showing up on your screen, don't despair. It was shown in my area as part of the PBS commemoration of the beginning of WW II. More often than not a program that appears on one section of PBS will appear on the others eventually. A letter to your local station wouldn't hurt.

Current — (urp) — season department ... Month before last we established that Dracula was more or less alive and well in a recent movie. Would that we could say the same for poor, put-upon Frankenstein's monster, who was "up dated" in a new series called *Struck By Lightning*. It is absolutely awful and I can but thank God Mary Shelley is long dead.

A thought for the month ... *why* is it that Britain turns out original masterpieces such as *An Englishman's Castle* and America does almost nothing but tired dogs (sorry, canine friends) like *Struck By Lightning?* And don't give me the "we only see their best" excuse. I only see *our* best (except for some of the horrors I have to review) and *our* best is nowhere near *their* best.

NOTE TO SUBSCRIBERS

Because of a fire that completely destroyed the plant that handles F&SF's subscription mailings, subscriber copies of the November and December issues were mailed late and, in some cases, improperly. We should be back on our usual schedule with the January issue. Meanwhile, we apologize for this less than perfect service and thank you for your patience. We have tried to handle each complaint on an individual basis, however if you have any questions about your subscription, please write to me, and I will follow up.

Edward L. Ferman
Publisher

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A favorite sf theme is that of strange or gifted children, and the kids in such stories are often Not Very Nice. However, Miriam, the central character in Charles Grant's new variation on the theme, is a true princess.

Secrets of the Heart

BY

CHARLES L. GRANT

I'm all alone in the house now, a terrible thing to be when you're used to so many people being around all the time. But the others are gone. A few of them, of course, were able to leave when I changed my mind. A few. And some of them died. A lot of them. It wasn't my fault, though. All I did was show them. Once they understood they all asked me and I showed them. That's when some of them started to leave, and that's when they started to die. It wasn't my fault. I didn't kill them and I didn't make them leave. They asked me. They really did. They ... asked me.

The last time there were five of them. They came to the house late at night in the rain. The biggest man, with water all dripping down his big funny hat, smiled at me when I answered the door and he said: "Excuse me, little girl, but would you mind if I used your mother's telephone? We had a slight accident back there around the bend a ways, and I have to get us a tow truck."

My mother always told me never to let strangers into the house, and my father did too, but these people were trying so hard to smile in the rain and shivering and wet and cold. So I let them all in and they stood around in the foyer like little wet puppies while I took the big man back into the kitchen and showed him the telephone on the wall.

"My name is Miriam," I said then. "Your friends aren't very happy."

"George Braddock," the man said, holding out his hand after he took off his glove. We shook hands just like big people do, and he took off his hat to show me his hair, all white and thick, just like a big cat's. "I'm afraid they're rather shaken, Miriam," He said then.

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"Our car slid off the road into a ditch. We've been driving a long way, I got us lost, and I wasn't really paying much attention to my driving. Let that be a lesson to you." He reached for the phone, then looked over at the stove. "Say, would your mother mind if we brewed up some coffee or tea or something? We sure don't want to catch our death at this late date."

I didn't mind at all. I put on the kettle and took a jar out of the pantry, and while he was talking to someone at a gas station — and he was very, very unhappy at what he was hearing, I could tell — put cups out on the table and went to the front again.

"George says you should come into the kitchen and have coffee or tea or something else that's warm," I said. They didn't seem to want to move right away until a lady yanked off her bright blue kerchief—so much hair, and so bright and yellow! — and said, "Well, I'm not going to wait around for pneumonia, folks. Come on. This is dumb standing around here."

The others, another lady and two men, followed her slowly, smiling at me as they passed and being very careful indeed not to drip too much water on the hall carpet. When they got to the kitchen, they took off their coats and hats and sat down and waited for the water to boil.

"Of all the damn luck," George said, coming away from the phone and sitting with his friends. "The man says there must be a hundred accidents out there today. He can't possibly get out here for a couple of hours, at the earliest. Looks like we're stuck for a while."

"Beautiful," the yellow lady said. "That's just beautiful."

"Oh, come on, Helen, it isn't all that bad. We could be still sitting in the car, you know." He smiled at me standing by the stove. "And at least Miriam here is a gracious hostess. We certainly won't freeze to death."

I wanted to say something then, but I didn't. Instead I just smiled and brushed my hair away from my face. The woman called Helen shrugged and looked like she'd decided it wasn't so bad in here after all, and the other woman, who was a lot older, like George, took a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lit one. When she saw that there weren't any ash trays, she dropped her match on the saucer I gave her.

"Where's your mother, Miriam?" one of the other men said. "Don't tell me you're all alone in this big old house."

"Bill, for Pete's sake, don't start," said Helen, taking a cigarette from the older lady's pack and tapping it on the back of her hand.

"Why don't you leave him alone," the white-haired lady said. Then she turned around in her chair and looked at me. She didn't like children. "I'm Mrs. Braddock. Are you alone, dear?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Always be polite: that's the first rule.

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"She must work," said Bill, and the other man nodded. Bill was Helen's husband. The other man was a friend. Nobody liked anybody very much. I knew that.

The kettle started to whistle then, and I picked it up and poured the water into the cups. Mrs. George said that she wanted to help me, but I said that I could do it all right; and, besides, it wouldn't be good for her arm to hold the kettle because it was heavy.

"Whatever are you talking about, child?" Mrs. George said, though her smile really wasn't very nice.

"It's the way you hold it," Bill said, pointing. "Anyone can tell your shoulder's bothering you again."

"Nonsense," she said, but she put her hand in her lap and gave me a funny look.

They talked a lot after that, and I kind of walked around the kitchen listening and not listening, and then I went out to the front where I looked through the windows at the road, waiting for the tow truck that was supposed to be coming in a couple of hours. They were very polite people, I guess, but they weren't very nice. I knew that. And I don't like people who aren't very nice.

Then I touched a finger to the windowpane — it was cold and slippery, like ice—and knew that someone was standing behind me. I turned around and it was Bill. He had a funny look on his face and he bent down to push my hair back behind my ear. It felt funny. I shook my head, and it fell back where it belonged. "You should have a barrette," he said, real soft. I stepped away from him and he followed me, grinning now and rubbing one hand over his stomach. "You're afraid of me, huh? I don't see why. I guess it's because we're strangers, right? You don't know me and I don't know you."

"I know you," I said.

He kind of blinked at me then and looked around as if there was someone standing in the corner. Then he straightened, smiled funny at me and went back to the kitchen. Then I saw Helen standing in the doorway to the hall, just looking at me. I smiled and she turned away. Their friend, whose name was Calvin, was looking in all the cupboards for something to eat. George told him it wasn't right he should do that, but Calvin only told him to keep quiet for a change, there's only a kid around and who's going to know the difference anyway for one lousy box of crackers. A moment later he found some cookies, and I guess they weren't really that mad at him because they all drank and ate, and then George got up and came out to where I was standing and said, "Miriam, I've looked over my options here, if you know what I mean, and I think I'd better take a quick walk down the road and see if I can spot the tow truck coming. I certainly don't want to have to impose on you any longer than I have to."

I shook my head.

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He frowned at me a little and went to the front door. It wouldn't open. He looked over his shoulder at me. "Why did you lock it?"

I walked away from him into the kitchen. The others weren't looking at me, though, they were looking at George, who walked past them without saying anything and tried the back door that led into the yard where I used to play. He couldn't open it.

"Well, for heaven's sake," Mrs. George said. She made a funny little laugh. "It's just like in the movies."

I didn't think so, but I didn't say a word. I just stood by the stove and watched them getting more and more nervous, though they were trying not to show it, while Mr. George went around trying to open doors and windows. Helen was getting madder and madder finally, and she was glaring at me; Calvin had finished the box of cookies and he was asleep, his head resting on his arms on the table, his mouth open and snoring. Bill wouldn't look at me.

"All right, Miriam, this has gone far enough," Mr. George said. He was standing in the doorway, his hat still in one hand. "What does your father have here, some kind of electronic lock on everything? Well, it doesn't matter. I think you ought to let us go now." He reached for the telephone.

"It doesn't work," I said.

He tried it anyway, because hardly anyone ever believes me when I tell them things. Like the time a long time back when I told my father and my mother that they were always thinking bad things about me because I was their only child and they had me while they were very young and now they were wishing they didn't have me at all. *Prancing around here like you own the goddamned place, like you were some kind of princess, like you own your mother and I lock, stock, and barrel! Well, I'm sick of it, Miriam! And by God, I'm sick as hell of you, damnit!* That's what he said; and though my mother told him to stop saying things like that in front of the child, I knew she was thinking the same thing. I knew that. So I told them that if that's the way they wanted it, then they didn't have to stay in my country anymore. That's when my father spanked me. It was the last thing he did before I decided that being a princess was fun.

That's the second rule.

When Mrs. George, who was smoking again and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling, told her husband to sit down, he did. And I could see that he was trying very hard not to yell at me the way he wanted to. "Now, Miriam," he said, very softly, with a little serious frown that made tracks across his forehead. "Miriam, I—"

"You're in my country now," I told him. "You have to do what I tell you."

That's the last rule.

"Oh, it's a game!" Helen said with a clap of her hands. It was like glass breaking.

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"Great," said Bill. "So how do you keep score?"

They all laughed at that except me. I didn't like them making fun of my country, or of me. As a princess, like it says in the books in my father's study, I had to show them that I was the ruler. So I decided that Calvin should stop snoring. Nobody noticed it right away, but they did after a while, and then they pushed me out of the way like I didn't belong there and began making lots of silly noises about finding a doctor and why is his face so horrid looking, and George was yelling that the damned telephone doesn't work, and Helen was crying quietly, and Bill just stood away from them and looked at me.

I didn't like him watching me.

They put Calvin down on the floor, and George tried giving him mouth-to-mouth something, but that didn't work and he was breathing real hard when he finally sat up. Then they carried him into the living room and put him on the couch, and George put his coat over his face. Then he saw me standing in the foyer looking at them, and he said, "Do you mind, young lady? This man is dead."

I knew that.

Then George decided he wasn't going to be nice anymore. He looked out at the storm for a while — shivering once when lightning came down and lit up his face — and then told the others that it looked like they were stuck for the night, if all the options were considered. He looked around a bit and, without even asking me, said they should go upstairs and see if there were any bedrooms they could use.

"But ... but what about the child's parents?" Mrs. George said, though I knew she wasn't as calm as she looked. "Good Lord, George, they could walk in at any moment. What would they think?" She looked at Helen, who was pale and trembling. "Don't you see, Helen? They could walk right in on us."

"No," I said, and I could see George believing me. He put his arm around his wife's shoulders and led her to the stairs. Helen followed him, and Bill came last. They went up and I waited for a while, listening to them walking around and turning on all the lights and talking in loud whispers. Pretty soon they were laughing. And pretty soon I could hear Helen making funny high noises and slapping Bill, who was laughing so hard he was nearly choking. It wasn't right, though, that they should be so silly when their friend was dead on my couch. And it wasn't right that they weren't playing the game the way they were supposed to. I guess I should have expected it because none of the others did either, but I always hope that this time was going to be the different time. So I waited until it got real quiet — except for the rain scratching at the house — and then I went to my room, which is next to the kitchen beyond the pantry, and I sat on my bed and thought for a very long

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time; and when I was done with all my thinking, I decided that I knew all about George and Mrs. George and Bill and Helen.

And once I decided what I knew, I decided not to change my mind.

And the next day it was still raining, though the lightning and the thunder had gone away for a while. Everybody came downstairs and went into the kitchen. I could hear George cursing a lot, but the others were very quiet. They were scared. Bill tried to get out a window in the night, but the glass wouldn't break. They were very scared. And they all almost jumped up to the ceiling when I came out of my room to watch them and see if they'd learned to play the game right.

"Miriam ..." George started to say something else, but he looked awfully old all of a sudden and only shook his head. Mrs. George's eyes were very red. Helen hadn't combed her yellow hair. Bill, who was standing by the stove, folded his arms across his chest and said, "I've read about people like you, you know. Telepaths, telekinetics — you do all those things with your mind, right?"

I knew what he was talking about. And he was wrong. Some things not even a book can tell you about.

"Bill—"

"For heaven's sake, Eleanor, don't say 'nonsense' again. We tried everything. It may be crazy, but it's the kid."

"I'm a *princess*," I told him. I was getting very mad.

"Her folks probably ditched her," Helen said, suddenly being very brave when her husband didn't fall down after I'd glared at him.

"No," I said. "They just wouldn't play by the rules."

"Wonderful," Bill said. "So what did you do, banish them from your creepy little kingdom here?"

"No," I said. "I just looked up in one of my books about princesses and queens. Sometimes I'm a fairy princess, you know, and sometimes I'm the Queen of the May. I was the Red Queen that day," and I made a slow chopping move with my left hand.

"Oh my God," said Mrs. George, and suddenly they were all running out of the room, and George was hammering on the door while Helen was throwing things at the windows to break them. Only Bill stayed behind, still standing there, still looking at me.

"Why?" he said. I guess he was very brave.

"Because you're not nice people," I said, walking over so that the table would be between him and me. "You do bad things to little girls like me, your wife gets into accidents all the time because she drinks, Mrs. George takes things from stores when nobody's looking, and —"

"All right, all right," he said. He was pale. His hands kept pushing into his hair. "So what are you going to do, kill us all?"

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"I wouldn't do that," I said, really mad that he would think that of his princess. "When you're nice again, you can go."

There was the sound of breaking vases and chair legs snapping and Mrs. George crying loud and high.

"And what about you," Bill said then. "Are you little miss perfect all the time?"

"I'm the princess."

Someone was kicking at the door.

"Does that make killing people nice?" He looked like he was going to kneel down then, but he changed his mind. "Listen, Miriam, we all have secrets of the heart, you know. Some of them are bad, some of them aren't so bad. But like I said, nobody's perfect. Not me. And, Miriam, you aren't either, princess or not."

I frowned, trying not to listen to him, but he said it again and walked out of the room like I wasn't even there. I thought about it as fast as I could. I hurried around the table and saw him look back at me, then reach out for the door. When it opened they all ran out like they were really and truly afraid of me. I didn't mind, though. They would find their car and it would be all right, but a minute later I decided that there would be this really big truck ....

I shrugged and went back to my room.

I knew all those words Bill was saying about me, but there was more to it and he didn't know that. He didn't know everything I could do when I thought about it and decided it would be so. And after a while I decided that I wasn't really a princess. I never had been a princess. This house wasn't my country, and the people who came here and weren't nice and didn't leave ... I wasn't their ruler. I had broken one of my own rules.

That's not nice.

That's my secret of the heart.

So I looked in the mirror and tried to decide how old I was. But I looked the same as I did when my mother and father didn't do what I told them. That was a long time ago. I think there weren't any cars or planes then, but I don't remember. And I'm still the same. My hair never grew and my face never got skinny and I never got tall and ... and ... so I went into the living room and, like George always said, I tried to review my options, which I think means choices.

I could follow my own rules, of course, and punish myself — but if I did that then I wouldn't *be* any longer, and I didn't want to be dead.

Or I could be very nice all the time and everyone who came to my house would like me after that and no one would have bad things in their heads or hearts about anyone else. That would make things very easy for me.

Or I could go outside and make the whole world my country and be nice and no one would have to worry about anything ever again because I would be ....

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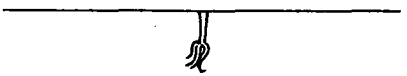
I don't know if I have any more choices. But I *do* know what I can do — Bill said it was telesomethings, and the books on the shelves say it's magic. He knows he's wrong, of course ... now. He knows that a telesomebody can't make something out of the summer air, the autumn wind. I can. So I guess it's magic.

That's nice.

And since the house is empty, I decided it was time to go outside for a change. But when I opened the door and took a good look at my world ... well, magic may be a nice word and it may be nice to have it, but all of a sudden I was very sure of one thing — that being nice all the time can be very, very boring.

I *know* that ... now.



"As a Color, Shade of Purple-Grey"

The *Archimides* travelled forty years. It carried Major John Kirlin to Tau Ceti, and now it was back.

One hundred thousand came to watch him land. Each had chosen a color, and shaded herself to fit — clothes, hair, eyes, skin and blood. The Huemaster arranged them tastefully around the ship.

The hatch opened. Major Kirlin stepped out. He looked at the throng, following the circle — lemon, gold, buff ... lime, emerald, olive green ... rose, crimson, scarlet ... With each successive shade, his eyes opened wider, and his mouth dropped lower. When Kirlin reached the magentas, he fainted.

The shadelings were shocked.

"Don't worry. He'll be all right," the Huemaster comforted. "He's just suffering from fuchsia shock."

— DAVID LUBKIN

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This is the third in a series of stories (most recently "The Haute Bourgeoisie," January 1980) about Ciely Blue, John Starfinder and his asteroid-sized space whale with the ability to travel through space and time.

"The Mindanao Deep"

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

The man addressing the huge, hushed crowd in the gray light of the November day is tall, thin, black-bearded. He has removed his grotesque top hat and stands bare-headed in the damp cold. The ambient acres of the battlefield are no longer red with the blood of brothers under the skin; peace and quiet reign, where, mere months ago, the sound of musketry mingled with the screams of the dying and the shouts of the soon-to-be-dead.

In printed form, the never-to-be-forgotten words the man is uttering are familiar to Starfinder. But now their message is aborted by sporadic gusts of wind that blow most of them away.

Like so many other historical moments Starfinder has tuned in on the time screen in the belly of the spacewhale, the present one lacks the dramatic quality that irresponsible historians and even more irresponsible writers have invested it with, and once again he is disenchanted.

Dive, whale, he "says." He selects a place-time from a list lying on the arm of the lounge viewchair he is reclining in: *Long Island, North America, A.D. September 22nd, 1776.*

By now the whale has absorbed all of the computer's data and can locate and home in on any place-time in the entire Space-Time Sea on direct command; but its omni-audio-vision covers a vast area, and Starfinder still has to tune in manually the exact spatio-temporal coordinates of a given event — a process that sometimes involves exceedingly fine adjustments of the dials that flank the time screen.

When the whale resurfaces he tunes in the Hanging of Nathan Hale.

During the next hour he "attends" the Hanging, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the May 29th, 1765, Meeting of

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the Virginia House of Burgesses. In the first instance he listens in vain for Hale to avow, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country"; in the second he listens with no more success for Colonel Prescott to shout, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!" and in the third he listens with the same lack of success for Patrick Henry to asseverate, "If this be treason, make the most of it!"

He is beginning to suspect that a great deal of recorded history is hype.

Anyway, watching past events all by himself is nowhere near as much fun as it was watching them with Ciely Bleu sitting beside him.

Ever since she left, the belly of the whale has seemed inordinately empty. The decks, when he walks upon them, give forth a hollow sound that he could swear was absent before.

Both of them had agreed that she should attend "Earth-school" somewhen, somewhere, for a brief period of time. "Not to improve my mind," as she put it, but "to enhance my sensibilities with regard to personal relationships." But before budging an inch from the whale, she made him promise to visit her at least once each week and to order "Charles" (her name for the whale) to remain in synchronous orbit during each visit so that conversation could more easily be carried on "among the three of them."

"You're to meet me after school and walk home with me and maybe help me with my homework. You can carry my books, if you like."

The school they decided upon was a three-story solidly built structure located in a late-1970s U.S. town within convenient commuting distance of the city of Buffalo, N.Y. Actually it was Ciely who decided upon it, because she fell in love with its architecture and because it predates the federally subsidized modern school, which will come apart at the seams within a decade, that is destined to replace it. Armed with assets accumulated during a profitable pastback into the pre-1929 1920s, Starfinder had no trouble establishing her as a foreign-exchange student from France and placing her in a respectable middle-class American household, where she is to remain for a single school year — a matter of about nine months.

He has not yet met her after school and carried her books home. There is no hurry. Time on board a spacewhale bears little or no relationship to time on a fixed celestial body, such as Earth; in fact he can, if he wishes, visit her every week throughout the school year within a matter of days and pick her up tomorrow. But he feels that this would be unfair to her, that he should allow some time at least to pass for himself before they are reunited. Not nine months of it, by any means, but *some*.

Meanwhile—

Ever since he repaired the whale's auxiliary ganglion in exchange for its indenturing itself to him for life, he has toyed with the idea of putting its abil-

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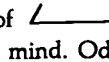
ity to travel in the past to maximum use and ordering it to dive to the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. Before the coming of Ceily he did not quite dare, and while she was on board he would not have dreamed of embarking upon such a perilous adventure.

Does he dare now?

Anyway, how much risk is really involved?

If, as certain pundits still insist, the Cosmos is the result of a "primeval explosion," he could, should this become evident, order the whale to resurface and reverse its dive. He wouldn't even need to order it to: it would do so of its own accord. And if, as certain diehards still maintain, the cosmos sprang from Yahweh's fingertips over a span of seven days, the dive would automatically be aborted.

He deactuates the time screen, gets up from the viewchair and goes over to the lounge bar and mixes himself a Magellanic Cloud. He leans against the bar, sipping the drink thoughtfully, staring at the empty time screen. The screen is part of the "network" he established when he linked the whale's ganglion electromagnetically to the main computer so that the whale's omni-audio-vision could be made to function, among other things, as a chronograph and to facilitate finding place-times (a function which the whale's absorption of the computer's data has since rendered superfluous). The sensors of orthodox chronographs, such as those found on space-whaleboats, are popularly believed to be fixed on Earth and to derive their chronological input from the matrix world's meteorological changes. Such is not the case. They are calibrated in Earth years, months and days, which gives rise to the misconception, but they derive their data from the changes constantly taking place in the sun. The invisible, far-flung sensors of the whale's onmi-audio-vision are far more sensitive than the most sophisticated of chronographs; and once Starfinder linked the computer to the whale's ganglion, he had merely to program the former with the then terrestrial date and let the whale take it from there. Now, whenever the whaleship dives, the Earth-calibrated years it dives through flash across the bases of both the master viewscreen on the bridge and the time screen in the lounge; and whenever it resurfaces, the day, the month and the year then extant on Earth appear along the bases of both screens.

Starfinder finishes his Magellanic Cloud, but continues to lean against the bar. He cannot get the bottom of the Sea of  (Space-Time) out of his mind. Oddly, he pictures it as an ocean floor, or rather, as the deepest part of a sort of cosmic Pacific: a Mariana Trench or a Mindanao Deep. More oddly yet, the absurd analogy adds to rather than subtracts from his fascination.

At this point the whale, to which

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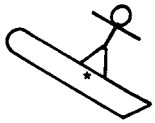
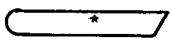
his mind is an open book, interposes a hieroglyphic question:



OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO ???

I'm thinking of it, whale. Have you ever dived that deep? Has any spacewhale?

The answer is self-explanatory:



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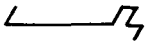
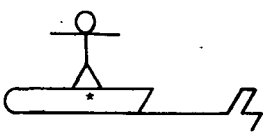
The bottom of the  Sea, to this whale at least, is unknown territory.

Would you dive that deep if I asked you to?

The answer is a simple "statement" of their pact, wherein the whale agreed to obey the man's every command in exchange for his repairing its auxiliary ganglion and freeing it from the Spacewhale Graveyard — the orbital Shipyards of Altair IV:



Starfinder leaves the lounge, walks down the main third-deck corridor to the forward companionway and ascends it to the bridge. He seats himself in the cushioned captain's chair and stares up at the master viewscreen. It still holds the stars that shone in the sky the night of the day Patrick Henry made his Stamp Act speech in the Virginia House of Burgesses.

Was that speech part of an overall pattern, or was it merely inserted willy-nilly, along with preceding and subsequent events, in the text of time?

Does history make sense? Does prehistory? Does anything?

Maybe, whale, the whole ball of wax constitutes a sort of-Cosmic Book whose pages, when taken out of context, read like the ravings of a madman, but which, when read completely through, illuminates the meaning, the purpose of creation. Unveils the Grand Design....

If there is a Grand Design, where better to find its roots than at the bottom of the Space-Time Sea?

His mind is made up. *Dive, whale,* he "says." *Dive to the bottom of the Sea. We'll plumb the depths of the Mindanao Deep!*

The whale girds itself. Crepitations from its 2-omicron-vii-activated drive-tissue reverberate throughout its belly. There is a faint tremor in its decks and bulkheads as the plunge begins.

Starfinder leans lazily back in the comfortable captain's chair and watches the years and the centuries flash by

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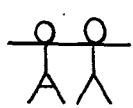
along the base of the viewscreen. A.D. 1699 ... A.D. 1345 ... A.D. 932 ... A.D. 419 ... B.C. 1....

The whale's momentum increases at an exponential rate as it dives even deeper into the Sea. There is no sense of motion, no indication of temporal retrogression, other than the accelerating readout and the subtle shifting of the stars. Ostensibly the whale is like "a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Its seeming immobility has a soporific effect upon Starfinder. He did not sleep well last night. He tossed and turned and twisted. Worrying about Ciely. Did he do the right thing in sending her to Earth-school? Far from benefiting from the experience, she may suffer from it. And if she does, it will be his fault. De jure, she has parents, in the far future, on a Andromedae IX; but in freeing her from them, he automatically assumed their role. He is, to all intents and purposes, both her mother and her father—



— in the language of the whale. He is not accustomed to such responsibility. It lies like lead upon his shoulders and haunts his dreams.

Now the sleep he lost last night catches up to him, and he sinks into a dream of Ciely Bleu. He sees her as he saw her when they said good-by; sees her in the "contemporary" pre-washed jeans and Shaun Cassidy T-shirt the wardrobizer outfitted her with before she left the whale. He sees her azure eyes, wide with the wonder only the young can know; her thin and piquant face. He feels again the cool moist kiss she left upon his cheek.

He wakes with a start. The years catapulting past along the base of the viewscreen have become a blur, but one of them registers subliminally on his mind: B.C. 4,201,549,631!

In the viewscreen proper, stars swarm like angry bees.

He starts to his feet and steps close to the screen, staring at the multicolored maelstrom. To facilitate his thinking, he visualizes the Space-Time Sea as a cosmic infundibulum. He knows that it is nothing of the sort, but he also knows that, assuming the primeval-explosion theory to be correct, as would seem to be the case, any object moving backward to the beginning must follow a trajectory analogous to the inner slope of a funnel. If the whale continues its dive and the primeval-explosion theory *does* turn out to be correct, the leviathan will be incinerated long before it reaches the figurative bottom of the Sea, and he will be incinerated along with it.

He is about to cry out, *"Resurface, whale!"* when he notices that the swarming stars are thinning out. Lowering his gaze to the screen's base, he notices something else: the rapid retrogression of years has ceased. The last one to be registered is B.C.

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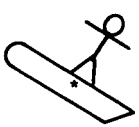
5,221,492,986.

The cessation admits of two possible answers, neither of which explains the thinning out of the stars: (1) the whale has resurfaced; or (2) it has dived past the moment the sun was born.

Have we resurfaced, whale?

The whale's response makes clear that they have not:



By this time the stars in the viewscreen have thinned out to hardly a handful and have receded into distant pinpoints of light.

As Starfinder stares into the growing blackness, one of them vanishes.

Another.

The situation of a few minutes ago has altered diametrically.

Should he order the whale to resurface? It cannot reverse its dive unless he does. Or should he let it proceed to the very bottom of the Space-Time Sea?

Theoretically the Sea is 15,000,000,000 years deep.

Only a far-flung scattering of stars are visible in the screen now. As he stares at them, they wink out one by one.

Total blackness.

Well, what else? Did he expect to find light in the Mindanano Deep?

No. But the Mindanao Deep is a mere metaphor. What we are discussing here, ladies and gentlemen, is page one of the Cosmic Book — the opening paragraph that deals with the "primeval atom" and the subsequent explosion whence sprang the Grand Design—

Starfinder laughs. *The Big Bang, whale — they made it up! It has no more scientific merit than Shu, son of Amon-Ra, holding his sister Nut, the sky, above his brother Keb, the Earth.*

As his laughter fades away, there is a grinding jar followed by a series of scraping sounds, and then silence. It is as though the whale has finally come to rest on the bottom of the Sea. The viewscreen vanishes before his eyes. The deck dissolves beneath him, the bulkheads from around him, the ceiling from above him. He finds himself standing in a little room with a picture window that frames a view of grass and trees and distant undulating hills.

The walls of the room are black. So is the ceiling. So is the floor. The dimensions suggest the interior of a cube.

There are two doors. One in the middle of the wall to his left, the other in the middle of the wall to his right. A gray desk with a matching swivel chair is positioned at right angles to the picture window. On the opposite wall is a fireplace.

Dazed, he stares through the pic-

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ture window at the grass. It appears to have been newly mowed. The trees are shade trees but they throw no shade. The distant hills are just that. Above them, a brief expanse of blue sky is visible.

The light he is seeing by is of uniform consistency and fills every square inch of the room. Its source cannot possibly be ascribed to the picture window. It appears to be part of the ambience itself.

He faces the fireplace, which up till now he has only glanced at. It does not qualify as a light source, since there is no fire in it, but fireplaces are among the most fundamental factors of human civilization, and he is in desperate need of a handhold on reality.

It is built of rectangular red bricks, boasts a pair of brass — or brass-like — andirons across which lies a small log, and is surmounted by a marble — or marble-like — mantel. Here, however, orthodoxy ends, for lying on the mantel is an object that at first glance appears to be a large ovoid lump of coal, highly polished and with tiny apertures, through which nacreous light emanates, spaced at regular intervals along its surface.

When Starfinder brought the whale back to life and stole it from the Orbital Shipyards of Altair IV, it was ninety-percent converted. In addition to transforming its spelaean interior into decks and compartments and machining away its "skin" and burnishing its transsteel subtissue, conversion included streamlining its asymmetry into a semblance of symmetry. In the process, the whale's self-image was altered, and it thinks, when it refers to itself as [redacted] that it is giving a reasonably accurate, though necessarily simplified, description of itself. It is not. In actuality, it looks very much like an asteroid-sized, highly polished ovoid lump of coal with windows.

Disbelievingly Starfinder stares at the "lump of coal" on the mantel.

Leaning forward, he closes one eye and peers with the other through one of the tiny apertures., He sees a tiny stateroom containing a tiny berth, a tiny vanity, a tiny bureau, a tiny chair and a tiny wardrobizer.

He peers through another aperture — no, not aperture, portscope — and sees a tiny compartment containing a built-in control console and a single chair.

The winch room. The nucleus for the loading and the unloading of the holds.

Another portscope, chosen at random, provides him with a giant's-eye view of the galley.

Through trial and error, he locates one of the portscopes of the bridge. He peers through it and sees himself standing in front of a tiny viewscreen, a doll less than a quarter of an inch tall.

The homunculus is leaning forward, staring into the screen.

Homunculus?

Starfinder straightens. He is sweat-

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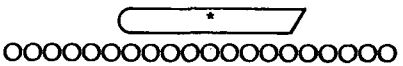
ing. *Where are you, whale?* he asks.

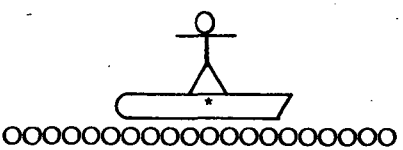
He does not expect an answer and is surprised when a hieroglyph promptly takes form in his mind:



At rest, on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea.

Where am I?

Again the whale responds without the slightest hesitation:



In the belly of the whale, on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea.

Starfinder wipes his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt.

If both the whale and he are on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea, how can the one, in miniature form, be on the mantel of a fireplace and the other be both in its belly and in the room that contains the fireplace?

All of this is a dream. It *must* be a dream. He is still sound asleep in the captain's chair. He merely dreamed that he awoke.

He tries to arouse himself, to bring himself out of sleep. But the ruse will not work. The reality of the room won't go away.

He finds himself staring at one of the two opposing doors. Very well, room. If *you* won't leave, *I* will.

He goes over to the door, opens it and steps into another room. The door is a swinging door and swings swiftly and silently shut behind him. The room he has just entered is a facsimile of the room he just stepped out of. It is identically furnished and its picture window frames an all-too-familiar view of grass and trees and distant undulating hills.

There is a door opposite the one he came in by. He crosses the room, opens it and steps into a third room. It is exactly like the other two.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.

The ancient quatrain erupted unsolicited from his subconscious. It is not quite apropos, but it provides him with a clue.

The door he came in by has swung to behind him. Slyly he crosses the floor, opens the opposite door and makes as though to enter the room beyond. Then, standing in the doorway, he darts a quick glance over his shoulder at the other door. Sure enough, it is open, and there is another Starfinder standing in *that* doorway darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at the "first" Starfinder, who,

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for all the "third" Starfinder knows, may be darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at still another Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

He doesn't return to the "first" room. What would be the sense? There is only one. Instead, he goes over to the desk and sits down in the swivel chair.

For a while he gazes absently through the picture window at the green grass and the shadeless shade trees and the distant, undulating hills. He wonders wearily what lies beyond. Probably an identical expanse of grass and trees backgrounded by identical undulating hills.

The window has no sash. It doesn't even appear to be set into the wall. It merely begins where the wall leaves off and ends where the wall resumes.

On an impulse he removes one of his boots and slams its heel against the glass. The glass, if glass it is, gives forth a dull, hollow sound, but it does not break or even crack.

He bangs the boot-heel against the adjoining wall. He is rewarded with the same dull, hollow sound.

He puts the boot back on.

The desktop next engages his attention. It is bare, save for a ream of paper surmounted by a black paperweight, and inset inkwell from which a quill pen protrudes, and a small framed holo-photo.

He picks the photo up and looks at it more closely. It is a hologram of a girl in her late teens or early twenties. There is a sad expression on her face, as though the first robin she saw that spring was dead. She has bobbed, brown hair bordering on black, dark eyebrows that somehow bring to mind blackbirds on the wing, blue eyes that make him think of the skies of Earth as they were when he pastbacked to the unpolluted 1920s. Her face is half in profile, and the graceful down-curve of the bridge of her nose and the nose itself seem joined to the line of her left eyebrow. Her mouth is a shade too wide, the lips too sensitive. Closer scrutiny reveals almost invisible hairline scars along her cheeks and across her forehead. Oddly, they add to, rather than detract from, her attractiveness. Written in white ink across the bottom of the photo, just above the frame, are the words:

To Starfinder, with all my Love.

By this time Starfinder is beyond surprise, a stranger to consternation. He returns the holo-photo to the exact spot he picked it up from and directs his attention toward the ream of paper. Perceiving that the topmost sheet is covered with slanted script, he pulls the ream closer to him and removes the black paperweight. Subsequent examination reveals that all the sheets of the ream are covered with the same slanted handwriting.

Whose handwriting is it?

God's?

He peers at it more closely. No, it

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isn't God's. It is his own.

The language employed appears to be Anglo-American, but when he tries to read the words they blur before his eyes and he cannot make out a single one of them. This does not surprise him either. Meticulously he arranges the pages exactly as they were and returns the manuscript — for manuscript it obviously is — to the same spot on the desktop he removed it from. He is about to replace the paperweight when he notices that it is a perfect cube and that there are a pair of diminutive hinges affixed to two of its adjoining sides.

It is a box, not a paperweight. Or perhaps it is a box and a paperweight both. Whichever, it can be opened.

Should he open it?

The question is an academic one, for he has already inserted a fingernail between the adjoining sides opposite the hinges. A modicum of pressure suffices, and the lid springs back with a click that seems to echo from the ceiling.

Even before he looks inside, Starfinder knows what he will see, and it is exactly what he does see: a tiny Starfinder sitting at a tiny desk in a tiny room looking down at something he is holding in his hands.

Looking down, no doubt, into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier room at an even tinier Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

As Starfinder sits there staring down at the back of his tiny neck, he feels someone's gaze on the back of his own neck; and turning his head and glancing up, he sees, above the plane formerly occupied by the ceiling, a massive head turned sideways at exactly the same angle his own is turned. He grins, and returns his gaze quickly to the tiny Starfinder in *his* box, but not in time, of course, to catch the tiny Starfinder returning his gaze to the even tinier Starfinder in *his* box.

He closes the little lid, and the *click!* it makes is joined by a louder *click!* from above. He replaces the box on top of the manuscript. Glancing upward, he sees that the "ceiling" is back in place.

Starfinder puts on his thinking cap.

By dint of much mental hammering and sawing, he reassembles a small block of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, memorized when he was blind:

> *Space and Time are merely subjective conditions of all our intuitions, in relation to which all objects are therefore mere phenomena, and not things in themselves ... In respect to the form of phenomena, much may be said a priori, while of the thing-in-itself, which may lie at the foundation of*

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these phenomena, it is impossible to say anything.

Granted, Kant wasn't talking about the Space-Time Sea. Nevertheless, his conclusions are pertinent to my predicament.

Given the existence of the bottom of that Sea, said bottom, by its very nature, would be bereft of both Space and Time.

But am I to believe that the infinite succession of rooms/boxes I appear to be inhabiting, when in actuality I am inhabiting only one — if indeed I am inhabiting any at all — constitutes the so-called thing-in-itself?

No. The rooms/boxes, plus their contents, plus the stereotyped scene framed by the "picture window," constitute my *interpretation* of the thing-in-itself.

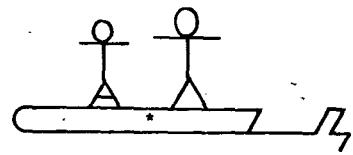
The whole package is as close as my perceptions can get to the so-called foundation and probably bears little, if any, resemblance to it.

Past, present, future — I am existing in all three. And all three are one.

Maybe what my perceptions are trying to tell me is that there is no End and no Beginning: that man invests reality with both, just as he invests it with Space and Time.

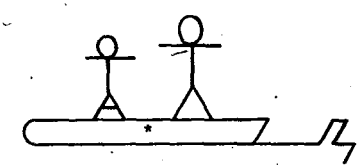
Whatever the case, it is painfully evident that the "Cosmic Book," if such a book exists, contains no Grand Design.

At this point a familiar rebus brings his brown study to a close:



What do Ciely, myself and you sailing the Sea of Space and Time have to do with the price of eggs, whale?

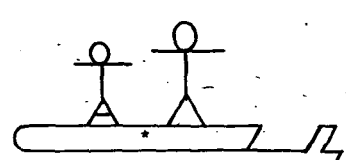
Instead of answering, the whale repeats the rebus:



Starfinder frowns. Obviously the whale is trying to tell him something and he is too dense to get the message.

Its ganglion, uncluttered by lies and misconceptions, enables it to perceive the bottom of the Space-Time Sea in simplistic form. But it is simultaneously perceiving it through Starfinder's senses, and the same lack of "sophistication" that is responsible for its own version has enabled it to read the meaning behind his.

Again, the rebus,



and this time Starfinder understands.

In olden days on Earth, in finite form, the concept the whale is conveying wore the word "existentialism."

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The whale is saying that in the absence of a macrocosmic design each individual must create a microcosmic design. But it is saying more than that.

It is saying that its and Ciely's and Starfinder's lives are inseparable and that therefore the three of them must collaborate — are collaborating — in creating a collective microcosmic design.

The manuscript on the desk bears this out. Although it is in Starfinder's handwriting, it is the work of three authors and can only be read collectively.

But who is the girl in the holophoto?

He asks the whale. *Who is* she, *whale?*

The whale does not answer. Either it doesn't know, or it isn't saying.

Obviously she is someone he is destined to meet in the future and who is destined to fall in love with him.

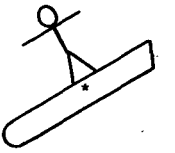
All right then, what is the significance of the "lump of coal" on the mantel?

The whale has already answered that. The "lump of coal" represents the microcosm as opposed to the macrocosm.

Starfinder gets up and goes over to look at it again. It isn't there. Neither is the mantel. Neither is the fireplace. He is standing on the bridge in the belly of the whale, staring into the blackness framed by the viewscreen.

In one sense, he has been standing there all along.

He grins. *Dive, whale,* he "says." *Dive back to A.D. September 12th, 1978. It's time for me to meet Ciely* after school. And the whale girds itself and crepitations resound throughout its belly as 2-omicron-vii fills its drive-tissue, and whale and man rebound from the bottom of the Space-Time Sea—



OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

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Lee Killough's new story concerns an artist who stumbles on a sort of timeless section of beach and meets a fascinating and ultimately frightening group of campers.

Achronos

BY

LEE KILLOUGH

The beach was a Tanguy landscape. Its grass-whiskered dunes, cast-up shells, and driftwood lay sharply etched in light and shadow before a background of fine mist that obscured the sea and distant arms of the cove and cast a glowing blue twilight over the beach even now in early afternoon. At least, Neil Dorn thought it should be early afternoon, though he could not swear to it. The past few days were a blur. He had driven blindly, following one highway after another down the coast, the roads growing increasingly narrower and less used, until he ended up on a sandy track and ran out of road here.

The smell of brine and seaweed was sharp in his nose, the seabreeze cool as it brushed his face and lifted his hair. Neil picked his way through the broken shells along the sea's edge, feeling the surf suck the sand from under his bare toes. This was the right place to come, he felt. He could be alone here. In the misty twilight, he could forget everything but the moment.

He could forget shrugging art dealers and paintings that no longer sold. He could shut out Connie, grown from the da Vinci beauty he had married to Reubens obesity, and her voice, shrill from disappointment and the strain of obsessive dieting.

"No wonder nothing sells. You paint the same things over and over. You need new vision."

As though vision could be ordered from a supply house, he thought bitterly. Well, to hell with her. To hell with everyone.

It was then, looking down, that he found the trilobite. Neil was no paleontologist, but he remembered enough from biology in high school and college to recognize that shape

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among the clamshells and sand dollars around it. He bent to pick it up. It was a moderate size, about six inches long. How had it come to be there? Trilobites did not ordinarally wash up out of the Paleozoic Era onto Twentieth Century beaches. It was in perfect condition, too. It looked as fresh as the sand dollar next to it, not at all like a fossil.

He put the shell in his shirt pocket and continued along the beach, feeling like the last man in the world. It would be easy to believe nothing existed beyond what he saw, that the universe consisted of nothing more than a misty cove and surf hissing over sand. He reveled in the feeling.

His satisfaction shattered in a bitter stab of anger at the sound of voices ahead of him. So he was not alone after all. Damn. Was there nowhere in the world uncontaminated by people?

The intruders appeared out of the mist a moment later. There were three, all children, slim and sexless, playing in near nudity on the sand. Neil was torn between his anger and a rush of pleasure. Against the glowing blue twilight, the children looked like a Maxfield Parrish illustration.

He called to them.

They stopped the intricate design they were building with shells and looked around. Two were fair, one with a short cap of curls, the other with hair reaching nearly to her buttocks. Both their eyes were blue as the twilight. The third had waist-length black hair and intense black eyes. They stared at him. The dark one nudged the long-haired fair one and whispered something. The fair one laughed.

Neil felt shock. The laugh was low and throaty, not a child's laugh at all.

The dark one said something that sounded like, "Gret."

They circled him, looking at him with curious eyes. He stared back. He had been wrong. They were not children, though they were still very young, hardly past adolescence. They were as tall as he and slender as willows, with skin tight and smooth. Clear, lively eyes watched him from unlined faces. And they were completely nude, he discovered with a start. What he had taken to be scraps of bathing suit were only designs painted on their skin.

The girl with short curls spoke. Neil could not understand a word. The girl frowned and scratched absently at the shell painted on one nipple. She spoke to her companions.

The dark one said something rapidly, then planting herself in front of Neil, began speaking in a loud, slow voice.

He wondered how treating him like he was deaf or retarded would help him understand her, but to his surprise, it did. What she said was distorted and oddly accented to his ears, but somewhere inside him he recognized enough of the words to grasp the sense of what she said. She was asking who he was.

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He replied, "Neil Dorn."

Her smile was one of triumph. She pointed to herself. "Electra." Her finger turned to the long-haired fair girl. "Ivrian." Finally she pointed at the curly-haired girl. "Hero. When are you from?"

That was what it sounded like, anyway. Neil was sure she could not mean that. She must mean either *where* was he from or when had he *come* here. Since he did not know which she intended, he shook his head. "I don't understand." He decided to ask a question of his own. "Are you vacationing around here with your parents?"

That appeared to amuse them. Electra and Ivrian caught at his arms. "No parents." Laughing, they pulled him with them toward the dunes. "We'll introduce you to our companions."

They were camped in the dunes just off the beach. Like some Renoir painting, tents in gay circus colors clustered on the sand: red and white, green and yellow, blue and gold. Between the bright splashes moved several dozen people, all tall, slim, and laughing, like the three girls. Some wore nothing, or nothing but body paints, while others seemed to have wrapped themselves in fringe from hips to shoulders or been draped in abbreviated togas and sarongs. Whatever the covering, it was clearly for adornment rather than modesty or protection, and all of it was in colors that glowed in the mist.

The girls called to their companions, talking so fast Neil could not follow. The others raced to meet them. Neil found himself the center of an excited, chattering crowd, with fingers plucking at his clothing and touching the stubble of beard on his face. Electra pointed and called names that for the most part went by in a blur: Clell, Garold, Byron, Capricorn, Aries, Gemini, Pilar, Vesta. No one appeared to have a last name. Neil wondered if any were real names. Surely the zodiac names were assumed.

The swirl around him was exhausting. He started looking for a way out.

Hero caught his eye and smiled. "Here." Tugging at his arm, she pulled him through the crowd to a stool under the awning of a blue and silver tent.

"Thank you." It had never been a thanks more heartfelt. He looked up at them standing around him. "Who are you people?"

Several of them chuckled.

Electra sat down on a stool beside him. "We're ... trippers ... on a party."

"You mean on vacation, on holiday?"

She licked her lips. For a moment her black eyes flicked away. "Yes, on holiday."

Before he could wonder at the edge in her voice, she jumped up, laughing. "You must join us."

"I'd like that." Every one of them was so exquisitely beautiful they made his fingers itch for the sketch pad and

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charcoal he had left in his Scout up the beach. "Just let me go bring something from my own camp." He stood.

Electra wrapped her arm around his. "Let me come with you to get it."

She walked back up the beach with him. The Scout seemed to astonish her. She stared at it for several long minutes, then insisted he bring it and his supplies back to their camp. "You can stay in my tent."

The look in her eyes as she said it sent warmth through him. At the same time, he could hardly believe it. This child was offering herself to him? How could she know what she was doing?

As though reading his mind, Electra licked her lips, tracing her mouth slowly with the sharp pink tip of her tongue. She smiled.

Neil felt his pulse pound. She did know what she was doing. There was experience in that smile and in the gesture of her tongue. He felt a little breathless. He had had no woman but Connie for a long time, and Electra — he let his eyes wander down her sleek body, lingering on the painted stars covering her nipples and pubic area — Electra was nothing like Connie.

The — what should he call them? Electra's word would do, he supposed — the trippers were making a meal when the two of them came back in the Scout. He was no sooner out of the vehicle than they were pulling him to a stool and handing him a plate of food.

He did not know what it was. He had never had anything like it before. There seemed to be half a dozen different meats and vegetables, and something like rice. There were potatoes fixed as he had never eaten them before. The meal ended in a choice of desserts that would have shamed a gourmet restaurant.

"Do you eat like this all the time?"

Electra looked surprised. "If a meal isn't a banquet, what's the point of eating?"

She did not say exactly that. He could still not understand much of what she said, but that was the general meaning. He filled the blanks with what he hoped were appropriate words.

"How do you stay so thin, then?"

That surprised her even more. "It's only a matter of adjusting the metabolism."

She must go to a diet doctor Connie had never tried.

"Are you from around here?"

Electra sampled from a tray of fruits. "I suppose we are now."

"You mean you're recent arrivals in the area?"

Several of the trippers looked around. Electra considered. She smiled. "Yes ... and no."

The amused note in her answer disturbed him. Something was more than strange here; something was wrong. They could not be just an ethnic group with a strange accent.

Out of thinking about their strangeness came fear. His food settled into a hard lump in his stomach. The

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hair on his neck began twitching. He had to get away.

He stood. "I need something from my car."

They made no attempt to stop him from walking away, but Electra followed. She was just a girl, he reassured himself, forcing himself not to run. He could easily break away from her if he needed to. In any case, none of the trippers had shown any signs of hostility ... yet.

"What's wrong, Neil?"

He rummaged through his gear, hoping she would leave. "Nothing."

She smiled. "You're a poor liar. Are you afraid of us?"

"Certainly not."

Her smile broadened. "A very poor liar. There's no reason to be afraid. We won't hurt you. We're fascinated by you. We've never seen anyone like you before. Twentieth Century people and vehicles like this are just museum pictures to us."

His head snapped toward her. "Museum pictures!"

She picked up his sketch pad. "What's this?" She opened it. Her black eyes widened. "Drawings." She looked up. "Do you really draw? By hand? Yourself?"

He resisted the desire to snatch the sketchbook away. "I'm an artist, yes."

Her face went incandescent with delight. "Oh, bring this back and draw me. I've never seen anyone draw by hand before."

"But the light won't be any good before long. Tomorrow, perhaps."

She laughed at him again. "The light won't change."

It was only then he realized that it had not changed since he arrived on the beach. He had been there for hours, yet the twilight was exactly the same.

Suddenly he was very frightened indeed. There was more strangeness here than just the trippers. He thought of the legends of fairy hills. They were just stories, of course, but what was around him was real. What *was* around him?

He was barely aware of being pulled back to the group, of his charcoal and sketchbook being thrust into his hands by an impatient, demanding Electra. "Draw me, Neil."

He sat with charcoal in his hand but made no move toward the sketchbook.

"He draws by hand," Electra told them. "Neil, show them."

He looked around at the beautiful, strange people. "Why doesn't the light change? Who are you? What's going on?"

A ripple of amusement ran through the group.

Only Hero did not smile. She frowned at her companions. "How is he supposed to know?" She squatted before him. "This is an achronos point, a place where time is frozen."

Neil blinked. "What?"

A dark-skinned boy wearing a bright gold and green sarong — Neil

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thought the boy was named Clell — said, "Time is like a stream, but as it flows through the universe and eternity, it hits occasional snags. That makes currents and eddies and, sometimes, quiet pools where time doesn't flow at all. This beach is one of those pools. We thinks perhaps it's because of the timelessness of the sea and sand."

Hero said, "So there's always twilight and there are no tides. Nothing changes here."

Neil's head rang. He felt like he was about to faint. "But I walked onto it like any other beach."

"So did we," Clell said. "We don't quite understand why, but because an achron is timeless, it touches all times. It's simultaneously accessible to anyone from any time."

Neil remembered the trilobite in his pocket. He took it out and stared at it. "You mean this actually washed up out of the Paleozoic?"

They nodded.

"And I come from the Twentieth Century. You—" He looked around at them. *When are you from?* Electra had asked when they met. "You're from the future." He said it in awe.

They nodded.

It took his breath away. "When?"

Hero shrugged. "The dating system is different for us. It wouldn't mean anything to you. It's a very long time from your century to ours, though."

"Have people flown to the stars? Have they met alien intelligences?"

There was a ripple through them, a shifting and turning away. Hero bit her lip.

It occurred to Neil they might have rules about what they could tell people from the past. "I'm sorry," he apologized. He changed the subject. "What happens when I want to leave?"

"You just walk away." Hero resumed her smile. "You re-enter time at the same moment you left it. You'll begin to age again and time will go on for you as before."

"Begin to age again? You mean right now I'm not —"

"Nothing changes here."

He drew a breath. "What did you call this place?"

"An achronos point, an achron."

"And people of your time know about them? They're probably popular vacation places, aren't they?" Imagine being able to spend a year on vacation and come back into time without losing a day of work or a single paycheck. "So you're all on vacation here?"

Again there was a ripple of uneasiness, almost embarrassment. Electra scowled at him. "Enough talk. Draw me, Neil. I want to see someone draw by hand."

It was like a signal. The next moment they were closing in on him, laughing and animated, all demanding to be drawn. As fast as he worked, charcoal flying over the pages, sketching one after the other, they wanted him to draw faster. Each sketch was greeted with a chorus of exclamations.

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Their admiration buoyed him up and carried him forward on a crest of elation he had not felt in a long time. He made sketch after sketch, of Electra, of Ivrian, Hero, of Clell, Aries, Capricorn, Vesta ... of all of them. The torn-out pages drifted to the sand around him, filled by their bright faces. Only when the sketchbook was used up would they let him alone.

He sagged on his stool, mind still churning but body exhausted. "Do people sleep in an achron?" he asked wearily.

"Of course." Electra caught him by the hand. "This way." She led him toward a black and gold tent.

He looked back. "My sketches."

"I'll look after them." Hero began gathering them, laying one on top of the next in a neat, precise stack.

Electra pulled him into the tent and dropped the flap.

Neil soon discovered he was not so tired after all. Electra had an entire encyclopedia of sexual tricks and took pride in demonstrating them all. His eventual protests that now he really *was* worn out just pushed her to greater efforts.

"Please. Enough," he begged. "Go play with one of your companions. They're younger and stronger than I am."

She frowned. "But I've done it all with all of them. There's nothing novel in putting them on. You're new. Here, let me try this and see if we can't go round one more time."

Eventually not even her enthusiasm and vigor could rouse him any longer. As he dropped into sleep, it occurred to Neil that if no one aged in an achron, one could gain a great deal of experience, of subjective age, without showing physical signs of it. How old might these young people really be?

By the time he woke Neil had forgotten that question. Opening his eyes to find Electra nestled under his arm left him marveling at her childlike beauty. He remembered, too, the adulation of the trippers while he sketched. The memory sent pleasure through him and helped beat back the stiffness caused by the acrobatics with Electra. His oils were in the Scout. If they had liked sketching so much, how might they react to seeing him paint?

He slid off the sleeping mat without waking Electra and pulled on his jeans and shirt.

It was a shock at first not to see a dawn outside, only the same glowing twilight that had seen him into the tent. He had always liked dawns. He missed the one that should have been here.

A number of trippers were up and about, looking as though they had been awake for some time. A couple were muttering about going to bed. That surprised him until he thought about it. Without the normal rhythm of night and day, each person would live on a personal cycle.

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Clell and Capricorn were awake, involved in some complex game requiring shells to be moved across the sand in intricate patterns. They were so engrossed they just nodded to him as he passed. Clell made what must have been a good move. He chuckled. Capricorn cursed long and with a viciousness that startled Neil. As a final gesture, Capricorn kicked Clell's shell pattern apart and stalked off among the tents. Clell called something after him in an insulating tone. Despite the frowns and angry voices, though, Neil saw a certain satisfaction in the two trippers. It gave him the distinct impression that they were enjoying the quarrel, relishing their anger.

Neil shook his head. They were odd people.

At the Scout he found Hero sitting on the hood. Her body was painted with a blue lace design. She sat with face intense, studying last night's sketches.

She looked up as he approached. "Can you teach me to do this?"

"I can try." he smiled. "It interests you?"

She shrugged. "It's something different to do."

He raised his brows. "Something different? You sound bored."

"I am."

"Would you like to sit for a portrait?"

Her eyes snapped into focus on him. "You mean a real painting? Like in a museum?" Sitting up straight, she raked her fingers through her curls. "What do I do?"

He pulled his oils and a canvas out of the back of the Scout. "First wash off that lace design. Can you find one of those toga-tunic things to wear?"

"Of course." She ran toward the tents.

Neil set up his easel near the water's edge. He would paint her in the style of Maxfield Parrish, he decided. Leaning over some shells, silhouetted against the glowing blue of the mist, she would be perfectly suited to it.

He was mixing paints, struggling for the right shade of blue, when Hero came back. She had most of the other trippers with her. In a toga that bared one small breast and draped low on her slim hips, she did indeed look like a Parrish subject. Now if he could only get the blue right.

"Everyone else is going to watch," she said. "Is that all right with you?"

"I'd be a better subject." It was Electra, of course, with a pout. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"You were alseep. I'll do one of you, too." He sighed. "I wish I had enough canvases to make portraits of you all to take back with me."

"Back with you?" A murmur of dismay went through them. "You're not going to leave?"

"I can't stay here forever."

Electra looked at him. "Why not?"

He stopped and considered. No one would miss him. Time outside was stopped for him, and he could leave

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whenever he wanted. Meanwhile, he had the company and adoration of these charming people. So why not stay? To hell with Connie and the dealers and finding new vision. This was vision enough.

"I won't leave right away."

He showed Hero how he wanted her to stand. "When you get tired, tell me and I'll let you rest a while." He dipped a brush into the blue. "How long are you people going to be here?"

Electra leaned over his shoulder as he began brushing on the first color areas. "That's just a blob of color. Does it really become a picture?"

"Watch."

They did, for a while, but he soon saw that painting was not going to fascinate them as much as sketching did. It went too slow. One by one they became bored and wandered away until only he and Hero were left. Even Hero complained of being tired, though she did not want to stop posing. He heard the voices of the others off around the cove, shouting and laughing.

Hero was beginning to emerge from the canvas. She looked different than he intended. Instead of a Parrish subject, she looked more like something created by Toulouse-Lautrec, bright and gay on the surface but hard and sad beneath. He peered at her. To his surprise, he found the painting correct. His eyes had seen and his hands transmitted what his mind did not notice. He remembered her remark about boredom.

"Where would you rather be than here?" he asked.

Her sigh came from her soul. "Just about anywhere. I want to see different faces, experience new weather. I'd like to see the night sky again. I've always wanted to go to the stars. I was going to go to Zulac after school, but of course that trip was ruined along with the laser cannon on Pluto." Her voice grew wistful. "I was just two years late to ever visit the stars. I'm trapped here instead."

He looked at her around the easel. "Trapped? You can leave when you want, can't you?"

She looked up. Her eyes swam with despair. "No, I can't. This isn't a holiday; it's sanctuary. We left time in the last safe moments."

Cold washed through him in an icy wave. The brush felt stiff in his hand. "Last safe moments before what?"

Hero straightened and stretched, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter. Nothing can change the fact that this is a party at the end of the world, and no matter how monotonous, the party has to go on, because we're all too cowardly to end it." Her mouth twisted in a sardonic grimace that looked grotesque on her child's face. "Welcome to eternity ... if you can stand the tedium."

"Hero!" It was Electra's voice, calling from up the beach. "Neil!"

She came out of the mist at them, running hard, black hair flying. Her face was alight and her eyes brilliant.

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"There's a dinosaur in the dunes on the other side of the cove. Clell is baiting it. Come and see."

A dinosaur? That sounded incredible, but if he and the trippers could wander in here and a trilobite wash up on the beach, why not expect a dinosaur to come walking through? "What kind of dinosaur?"

Electra tossed her head. "How should I know? It looks vicious is all I know. Hurry before it's all over."

She was off again. Hero was right behind her. Neil stared after them a minute with visions of a tyrannosaurus rex raging in the dunes, then he followed, too.

He heard the noise long before the dinosaur was visible. The reptilian hissing and roaring was overlaid by human voices shrill with excitement. Neil came out of the mist behind Hero and Electra to look down into a natural bowl formed by the depression between three dunes. In the bottom, twenty feet of prehistoric saurian stood high on long, muscular hind legs, bracing on its tail like a kangaroo. Tiny forelegs were folded against its chest. Its neck swiveled as it hissed and clashed a frightening set of teeth at Clell, who was running in mad circles around it, waving a driftwood club. The creature did not look to Neil like drawings purporting to show how the tyrannosaurus had looked. That was some relief, but the beast was still one of the predatory species. It started crouching, tail trembling a bit.

"For god's sake, Clell, stop that," Neil shouted. "You'll be killed!"

Clell laughed. "I'm faster than it is."

The saurian sprang. Three-clawed hind feet slashed for Clell. The tripper dodged sideways. The saurian followed with murderous speed, but Clell was even faster. The claws missed him by a wide margin.

Clell laughed up at Neil. "See?"

His companions yelled encouragement from where they stood on the dunes ringing the bowl. They waved driftwood and stones.

The saurian leaped again, and again Clell was out of the way before it landed. The saurian hissed. Its lashing tail flung sand at the ring of watchers.

"You're too cautious, Clell," Electra yelled. "Move close."

Neil glared at her. "No! Stay back!"

Clell closed in on the saurian. He rapped it on the back with his club. The saurian came around just a moment too late to catch the tripper with its teeth. The spectators cheered in delight.

"Clell," Niel pleaded.

But grinning, Clell went back in again. This time, however, what Neil feared happened. The saurian anticipated him. A front claw raked down the tripper's arm. Blood spurted.

As though it were a signal, the trippers shrieked with a single voice and charged down into the bowl. The saurian disappeared under a wave of human bodies. Even Electra and Hero

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joined. Neil was left alone on the side of the dune. He was horrified by what was happening, yet the excitement caught at him, too. Never before had humans hunted a dinosaur. Perhaps none ever would again, and he was here to see when puny humans challenged a thunder lizard.

The saurian was screaming. Human voices were screaming, too, though whether in agony, ecstasy, or anger was impossible to determine. The pile of saurian and humans twisted and heaved. The great tail lashed, churning up the sand. Human arms rose and fell, pounding wrinkled hide with clubs and stones and dagger-shards of shell. The air sharpened with the smell of blood.

Then all at once it was over. The saurian lay silent and unmoving on the sand. The victors backed off, yelling in triumph. Some dipped fingers in the saurian's blood and began painting each other.

Electra raced up the dune toward Neil, face ablaze. She threw her arms around him. "Wasn't it *exciting!* Put me on, right here, right now." She began pulling at his shirt. "It was so glorious. You should have joined. You should —"

Neil was distracted. Someone, somewhere, was still screaming. Only now it had the note of pain, not triumph. He looked down the dune to see Hero sprawled beside the saurian, clutching at her stomach. Blood poured between her fingers. "My god." Neil stumbled down the dune toward her.

When he reached her he wanted to cry. The saurian had opened her from shoulders to thighs with one rake of a hind foot. He started to kneel beside her.

Electra caught at his arm. "Neil, forget her. Put me on."

He turned on her incredulously. "How can you think of that *now?* We have to help Hero."

Electra scowled. "She's dying. Forget her."

Hero stared up at him with pain-glazed eyes. Her mouth worked. A hoarse whisper emerged. "I wanted to leave the party, but, god, this hurts so—" She went slack.

Neil felt a chill. No one aged here, but they could still die.

"You see," Electra said, "she's dead. Now, take off your clothes. Let me paint you with blood."

Neil slapped away her hands. "Hero is supposed to be your friend," he shouted. "Don't you care about her?"

She licked her lips. "What I care about is that I feel passion now I haven't felt in a very, very long time. I want to make the most of it."

Neil looked around. "Do *any* of you care?"

No one answered him. They were too busy starting an orgy. They were no Renoir painting now, no Maxfield Parrish. Neil was reminded of the hell panel from Hieronymus Bosch's "Gar-

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den of Earthly Delights."

Electra snapped, "If you're not interested, I'll find someone who is."

She flung away in disgust and hurled herself at Capricorn, who was carving a piece of hide from the saurian's flank. He caught her and bent her backwards over the huge carcass.

"No," Neil said, "I guess none of you do."

All they cared about was finding some new excitement to alleviate their boredom: a stranger, an old art form, a little blood and mayhem. What would be next? What would happen, he began to wonder, when they tired of their Twentieth Century pet? The possibilities sent cold through his bones.

He found himself running back around the beach toward the Scout. He was almost to the car before he remembered the rough painting of Hero, still by the water. He went after it and picked up the pile of sketches where Hero had left them on the hood.

So he needed a new vision. Well, by god, he had one now. He wished to god he did not have it ... a Tanguy beach and a Bosch orgy, and dozens of desperately bright faces from the end of the world. They would probably haunt him the rest of his life. He hoped Connie was prepared to cope with his nightmares, and the public with what he put on canvas.

He gunned the motor into life and kicked in the four-wheel drive. With the visions burning from his head to his fingertips, he headed the Scout back across the dunes into time.

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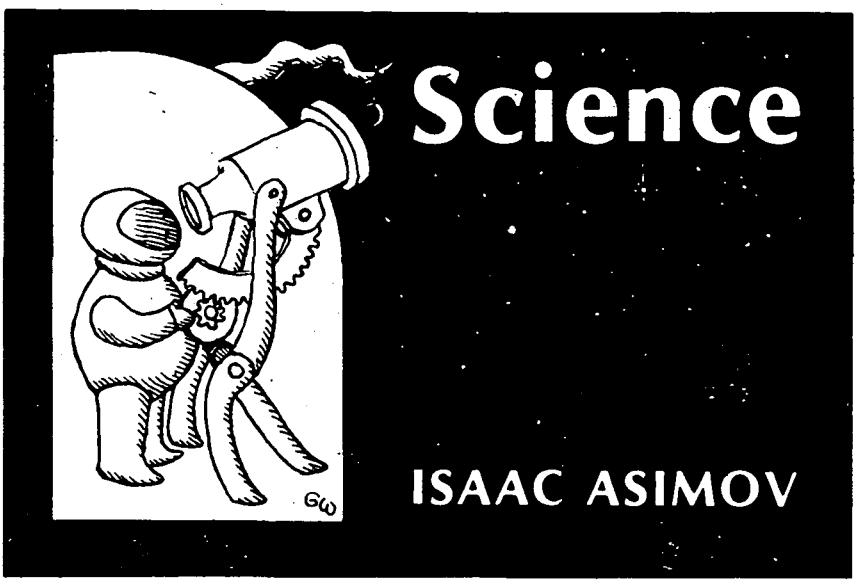

THE NOBLEST METAL OF THEM ALL

I was at lunch with a group of men yesterday in a pleasant midtown restaurant when, quite unexpectedly, a woman accosted me with great excitement and glee. She was white-haired, roughly my age, and attractive.

What was very evident was that she was greeting me in the style of an old friend, and, as is usual, a pang of exquisite embarrassment shot through me. I don't know why it is, but though all my old friends seem to have no trouble remembering me, I have the devil's own time remembering them. A brain deficiency, I think, born of trying too hard never to forget the names of all the elements and the distances of all the planets.

I relaxed a trifle when it turned out from her ebullient conversation that she was a friend of my sister's actually, and that her only connection with us dated back to 1938. Really, with a gap in time like that, difficulty in remembering is but a venial sin.

Then she said, "But I always knew, even then, Dr. Asimov, that you were going to be successful and famous some day."

The proper response, of course, would have been a modest simper and a shy hanging of the head, but another thing I have the devil's own time remembering is the proper response.

Instead, I said, "If you knew that, then why didn't you *tell* me?"

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Actually, though, now that I think it over in cold blood, I wouldn't have wanted her to tell me. The surprises that time brings make up much of the excitement of life — and of science.

Which, of course, brings me to the subject of this month's essay.

Gold is rare, it is beautiful, it is dense, it neither rusts nor decays.

The rareness and beauty call for no comment, but we can figure the density most dramatically by comparing it with lead.

Lead is about 3000 times as common as gold in Earth's crust and is as ugly in its grayish coloring as gold's gleaming yellow is beautiful. Lead is common enough for day-to-day use, therefore, and valueless for anything else.

Lead is pretty dense, however, and since it is the densest object ordinary people in ancient times were liable to come across, it became a byword for density.

You walk with leaden feet when you are leaden-hearted, or when your eyes are leaden-lidded for want of sleep. Things lie heavy as lead on your bosom when you are unhappy.

Yet if the density of lead is 1, the density of gold is 1.7. If you have a lump of lead and a lump of gold of equal shape and size, and the lead weighs, let us say, 3 kilograms, the gold would weigh 5 kilograms. If being leaden-hearted is to be sorrowful and unhappy, imagine how sorrowful and unhappy you would be if you were golden-hearted — except that is not how metaphors work.

As soon as you use gold in your metaphors, it is the beauty and value that express themselves, not the density. Therefore, if you trudge heavily on leaden feet when you are miserable, you dance trippingly on gold feet when you are happy.

The permanence of gold rests on its very small tendency to combine with other kinds of atoms. It therefore does not rust, is not affected by water or other substances. It even remains untouched by most acids.

This resistance against the influence of other substances, this haughty exclusiveness led people to speak of gold as a "noble metal," since it nobly scorns to associate with substances of lesser quality. The social metaphor was carried over to metals like lead or iron which were not so incorruptible and were therefore "base" metals, where the "base" represents low position in social standing.

Now, then, what are the chances of there being metals that are nobler

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than gold, rarer, denser, less apt to change? To an ancient, the notion might have been a laughable one since gold had so long been used metaphorically for perfection (even the streets of heaven could find no better paving blocks than gold). To ask for something nobler than gold would be to ask for something that improved on perfection.

And yet such a better-than-gold metal exists, is now well known, and was, in fact, sometimes found and used even in ancient times. It is found in a metal artifact in Egypt dating back to the 7th Century B.C., and some of the Incan metal artifacts in pre-Columbian South America are made of an alloy of gold and this other metal.

The first specific reference to it in the scientific writings of Europeans came in 1557. An Italian scholar, Julius Ceasar Scaliger (1484-1558), mentioned metal found in Central America, which could not be liquefied by any heat applied to it.

Here was immediately an indication that it surpassed gold in one respect. Of the metals known to the ancients, mercury melted at very low temperatures, and tin and lead at only moderately high ones. Of the other four, silver melted at 961° C., gold at 1063° C., copper at 1083° C., and iron at 1535° C.

One might have suspected that if gold were truly noble it would resist fire as well as air and water and would not melt. The fact that copper, which is baser than gold, melts at a slightly higher temperature, and that iron, which is considerably baser than gold, melts at a considerably higher temperature is rather disconcerting. (For all I know, it might have been viewed as a heavenly dispensation to permit iron to be hard and tough enough to be used for weapons of war, something too utilitarian for the nobility of gold.)

Clearly, the new metal must melt at temperatures higher than iron does.

The first scientists to study the metal and describe it in detail were an English metallurgist, Charles Wood, and a Spanish mathematician, Antonio de Ulloa (1716-1795). In the 1740's both studied specimens that came from South America. One place where the new metal was obtained was as nuggets in the sands of the Pinto River in Colombia. Since the metal was whitish, the Spaniards on the spot called it "Pinto silver." They used the Spanish language, so that it was "platina del Pinto."

Pinto silver was not real silver, of course. It was much denser than silver, and it melted at a much higher temperature. It didn't even really look like silver. There is a distinct yellowish touch to silver which gives it a light, warm look, that other white metals do not have. Aluminum and

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chromium may be white and shiny, but they are not silvery in appearance, and neither is platina del Pinto.

Eventually, when the "-um" ending became standard for metals, the "Pinto" portion of the name was dropped and the new metal became "platinum." In English, platinum and silver are so unlike in name that the connection is lost. In Spanish, however, silver is "plata" and platinum is "platino."

Chemists became intensely interested in platinum after its discovery, but there wasn't much that could be done with it usefully. It either had to be left in its original lump, or it could be dissolved, with difficulty, in a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acids.* In this way a platinum compound is formed from which a loosely-aggregated "spongy" form of platinum metal can be precipitated.

Shortly before 1800, the English chemist and physician William Hyde Wollaston (1766-1828) worked out a method for putting spongy platinum under heat and pressure in order to convert it into a malleable form that could be hammered into small crucibles and other laboratory ware. Such platinum ware was much in demand and, since Wollaston kept the process secret and there were no independent discoverers for nearly thirty years, he grew rich. In 1828, shortly before he died, he revealed his method, but just about that time an even better method was worked out in Russia.

Although platinum was first obtained from Central and South America, the first real mines were developed in the Russian Urals. Between 1828 and 1845, Russia made use of platinum coins. (There is even a story that before that time, some Russian counterfeiters, happening to come across some platinum, made counterfeit coins with platinum replacing the silver. The only case, that was, of fake coins being better than the real thing.)

Why was platinum so in demand for laboratory ware? Since it reacted less than even gold and was therefore nobler than gold, laboratory equipment made of platinum could be counted on to remain untouched by air, by water, or by the chemicals with which it came in contact.

What's more, platinum had a melting point of 1773° C., even higher than that of iron. This meant that platinum-ware could be heated white-hot without damage.

**The mixture is called "aqua regia," Latin for "royal water," because it dissolves gold, the noble metal, although neither acid will do so by itself — and it dissolves platinum, too, though more slowly.*

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Platinum is denser than gold, too. On the basis of lead's density set equal to 1, gold might be 1.7, but platinum is 1.9.

Finally, it is just as rare as gold is in the crust of the Earth.

In that case, if platinum is less reactive, higher-melting, denser, and just as rare as gold, isn't it better in every way?

No, it isn't. I've left out one of the characteristics that makes gold what it is — beauty. Neither platinum, nor any other metal ever discovered, has the warm yellowness of gold and none are anywhere near as beautiful.* Platinum can have all the nobility and density and high-meltingness and rareness you can give it, and can even be more expensive than gold, but it will never have the beauty, or be as cherished and desired as gold is.

Platinum is not the only metal that is nobler than gold. It is one of three very closely allied metals.

In 1803, an English chemist named Smithson Tennant (1761-1815) noticed that when he dissolved platinum in aqua regia, a black powder was left over that had a metallic luster. It seemed to him that the platinum he had been working with was not pure and that it contained minor admixtures of other metals.

Platinum, however, was the most difficult of all known metals to force into chemical reaction. If there were a metal or metals that were dissolving in aqua regia more slowly than platinum was, those metals had to be hitherto unknown.

Tennant studied the residues carefully, forcing them into solution with considerable trouble, and was able to divide them into two fractions with different properties. One of them formed chemical compounds of a series of different colors, and he therefore named it "iridium," from the Greek word for the rainbow. The other formed an oxide with a foul smell (and very poisonous, too, but Tennant didn't make enough to die of it), and so he called it "osmium," from a Greek word for "smell."

Chemically, iridium and osmium are so like platinum that geological processes throw them together. Wherever platinum is concentrated, iridium and osmium are concentrated, too, so that one always recovers a triple alloy. However, iridium and osmium are only a fifth as common as platinum (or gold) is in the Earth's crust, so that the mixture is always chiefly platinum.

Iridium and osmium are, in fact, among the rarest metals in the Earth's crust.

**There are copper-zinc alloys ("brass") that are gold in color but they'll develop a greenish rust given the least excuse, and rather spoils things.*

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Individually, they are like platinum, only more so. Both iridium and osmium are even nobler than platinum, even more reluctant to combine with other compounds. Iridium is, in fact, the noblest metal of them all.

Both are denser than platinum, since on the lead = 1 basis, iridium is 1.98 and osmium is 1.99. Osmium is, in fact, the densest normal substance known.

Both are higher melting than platinum. Iridium melts at 2454° C. and osmium melts at 2700° C. Here, however, they set no records. The metals tantalum and tungsten melt at temperatures of 3000° and 3400° C., the latter being the highest-melting metal of them all.*

Oddly enough, the Earth's crust seems to be deficient in the three "platinum metals" (a term that includes osmium and iridium). For every 5 atoms of gold in the Earth's crust, there are 5 atoms of platinum, 1 atom of osmium and 1 atom of iridium.

In the Universe as a whole, however, it is estimated that for every 5 atoms of gold, there are 80 atoms of platinum, 50 atoms of osmium and 40 atoms of iridium. Why the discrepancy?

There are other atoms in which Earth is deficient when compared to the Universe as a whole — hydrogen, helium, neon, nitrogen and so on. These do not offer any puzzles. They are elements that are themselves volatile, or that form volatile compounds, so that Earth's gravity is not intense enough to hold them.

Platinum, iridium and osmium are, however, not in the least volatile in either elementary or compound form. Why then, are they missing?

Well, the Earth's *crust* is not the Earth. The crust can lose elements not only to outer space, but also to Earth's own interior.

Thus, for every 10,000 silicon atoms in the universe, there are 6,000 iron atoms. For every 10,000 silicon atoms in the Earth's crust there are only 900 iron atoms. Eighty-five percent of the iron is gone because it is down in the Earth's depths, where there is a liquid metallic core that is chiefly iron. The core also contains a disproportionate share of those metals that tend to dissolve in the iron to a greater extent than to mingle with the crustal rock. The platinum metals are apparently readier to dissolve in iron than gold is, and that leaves a deficiency of the former in the crust.

* * *

**Carbon, a non-metal, melts at a somewhat higher temperature than even tungsten does, and a compound of tantalum and carbon, tantalum carbide, does even better than either, melting at 3800° C.*

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Now let's switch to something else which, at first blush, seems to have no connection at all with the matter of the platinum metals. As we shall see, though, science has its surprises.

There is some value in knowing the rate at which sedimentation takes place in shallow arms of the sea, and how fast sedimentary rock is formed. That would help us date fossils; it would help us measure the rate of evolution; it would help us match up the evolutionary story in different parts of the world, and so on.

We know what the sedimentation rate is here and there on Earth today because we can measure it directly. The question is: Has the rate always been the same, or has it been markedly faster or slower in this or that epoch of geologic history.

Walter Alvarez of the University of California, together with several coworkers, had a technique they thought could be used to establish archaic sedimentation rates. As it turned out, the technique didn't do that, but while working with it in rocks dating back to the Cretaceous at Gubbio Italy (110 kilometers, or 68 miles, southeast of Florence) serendipity raised its exciting head. In other words, they found something they weren't looking for that could be more valuable than anything they had been expecting to find.

They were using a neutron activation technique. This is a device in which neutrons are fired at a thin slice of rock, neutrons of an energy which some particular atoms will pick up with great readiness while other atoms will not. The atom that does pick up the neutron will be converted into a known radioactive atom which will break down at a known rate giving off particular types of radiation. By measuring the radioactive breakdown, the quantity of the particular neutron-absorbing atom can be measured.

Since radioactive radiations can be measured with great precision, neutron activation techniques can quickly and easily determine the exact quantities of tiny traces of particular atom varieties.

Alvarez tested the delicacy of the technique by setting up the experiment in such a way as to measure the concentration of a particularly rare component of the rocks — iridium. The quantity of iridium in those rocks was, roughly, one atom in every 100 billion. Testing for that iridium atom was something like finding one particular human being in 25 planets each as full of human beings as Earth is.

That's a pretty stiff job, but neutron activation techniques could handle it easily.

And though Alvarez and his associates decided the technique wouldn't

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solve the particular problem they were tackling, they did come across a narrow region in the rock in which the iridium was 25 times as high as it was everywhere else. That still wasn't much, you understand; one atom in every 4 billion, but, plotted on a graph, that would make an extraordinarily high blip in one specific place in the rock.

How could this happen?

It could be that for some reason, over a relatively short period of time, the seas teemed with iridium (relatively speaking) and that more of it settled out than ordinarily did; or else that the seas had the normal amount of iridium but, for some reason, it settled out 25 times as fast as usual, while other atoms (or at least the common ones) were still settling out at their ordinary rates.

A selectively-rapid settling seemed beyond the bounds of possibility, and so it would seem we are stuck with supposing the presence of abnormally high concentrations of iridium in the sea. If so, where could it come from?

Could there have been some nearby supernova that enormously increased the incidence of cosmic rays that fell upon the Earth, and could these have induced nuclear reactions that, for some reason, increased the iridium content of Earth's outermost layers generally at just that one particular epoch in our geologic history?

If so, there should be other indications. The iridium isotopes should not be in their normal ratios since the most likely changes would produce one particular iridium isotope rather than the other. (There are two stable iridium isotopes.) In addition, there might well be other elements that would be increased in quantity, such as the radioactive isotope plutonium-244 and its decay products. Alvarez ran some quick tests in that direction and his preliminary results seemed negative.

That weakened the likelihood of a supernova as an explanation.

It is possible, then, that matter from the outside Universe was brought to Earth bodily? Such matter could be considerably richer in iridium than Earth's crust was, and this could lead to a temporary 25-fold jump.

The obvious source of such matter would be a meteorite — a huge nickel-iron meteorite, quite like Earth's central core in chemical makeup and therefore richer in iridium than Earth's crust is. Perhaps it smashed into the Gubbio region and left its mark in the iridium increase.

It is hard, however, to believe that a catastrophic collision would not have left some physical signs in the form of crushed rock, distorted strata, lumps of meteoric iron, and so on. Perhaps the meteorite hypothesis can

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have its shortcomings ironed out, but I rather think that it is a low-probability explanation.

What else? If not a meteorite, what other form of matter could reach Earth?

What about Solar material? Suppose at some stage in past history, the Sun hiccuped for some reason and had a very mild explosion. Until very recently, this would have seemed most unlikely, but in just the last few years, our studies of the Sun have been shaking our faith in it as a steady and reliable furnace. The Maunder minima (see OUT, DAMNED SPOT, March 1979) and the missing neutrinos (see THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT, November 1979) have worried us a bit. We're somewhat readier to believe in a solar hiccup now than we would have been a decade ago.

Such a slight explosion might have amounted to nothing at all on the Solar scale; an insignificant fraction of the Solar mass may have blown loose and gone drifting off into space. Some of this finally reached the Earth, settled through its atmosphere and ocean into the sedimentary rock where it mixed with the native material. Since the solar matter would have been richer in iridium than Earthly crustal material would be, that would account for the iridium-rich region.

After the explosion was over, the Sun would settle down to its accustomed behavior, not measurably different from what it had been before. The solar material on Earth would eventually all settle out, and the Earth would go on as before, too. What's more, the short period of settling of Solar material would not be a terrific smashing blow, as of a meteorite. It would be a gentle downward drift. If it weren't for the blip in the iridium, we would never know.

And yet — That slight explosion on the Sun must have multiplied the amount of heat delivered to the Earth. The soft drift of matter must have been accompanied by a most harsh rise in temperature which may have been only momentary on the geologic time scale but which may have lasted days (or weeks or years) on the scale of life upon the Earth.

Such an explosion would have wreaked havoc with life on Earth — if it had happened.

Can we argue, then, that since no such havoc seems to have taken place, that the explosion couldn't have happened?

Let us ask first just when this iridium blip took place. According to Alvarez's dating procedures, it happened 70 million years ago at the end of the Cretaceous, and it was precisely at the end of the Cretaceous that the Great Dying took place (see THE DYING LIZARDS, September 1968 — an

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essay in which I discussed a supernova as the possible cause.)

Seventy million years ago, over a relatively short period of time all the giant reptiles died out, all the ammonites, and so on. It is estimated that up to 75 percent of all the species living on Earth at that time were suddenly wiped out for some unknown reason.

Nor can we assume that the remaining 25 percent were untouched. It may be that, let us say, 95 percent of all individual animals were killed, and that the larger ones who reproduced at a slow rate and were reduced to an unusually small number could not recover but died out. The smaller ones, who survived in larger absolute numbers and who were more fecund managed to hang on — but just barely.

What it amounts to is this:

About 70 million years ago, Earth may have been nearly sterilized, the life upon it nearly wiped out — on the basis of the fossil record.

About 70 million years ago, Earth may have suffered a Solar accident that would have been capable of nearly sterilizing it — on the basis of the iridium blip.

Can this convergence of two entirely different pieces of evidence be a coincidence?

Of course, it is hard to pin too much on this preliminary work by the Alvarez team and they make no claim that their speculations of possible astronomical catastrophe are more than speculations. I myself would like to see a thoroughgoing analysis of 70-million-year-old rocks in many places on Earth, for a Solar explosion would have affected the entire surface, it seems to me. It should also have resulted in raised values for some elements other than iridium, too.

Perhaps the suggestion will turn out to be an utterly false alarm on closer examination. If so, I will confess to feeling relieved, for it is a grisly event that seems to be indicated — chiefly because, if it happened once, it could happen again, and, perhaps, without warning.

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Keith Roberts ("The Big Fans," May 1977; "Ariadne Potts," April 1978) never seems to repeat himself, except in terms of quality, which is always high. This new story starts with the most mundane of heroes — a lavatory attendant — and turns into something quite unearthly and moving.

The Lordly Ones

BY

KEITH ROBERTS

How beautiful they are, the Lordly Ones,
Who live in the heart of the hollow hills.

—Rutland Boughton, "The Immortal Hour."

When I was very young I was given a pedal car. That must have been just before the War, as such things later became unobtainable. I mean by that World War Two. People of my generation still call it "The War," though of course there have been many wars since.

It was a very fine car indeed, much larger than was common and with a door on one side that could be opened. It was painted a bright golden brown, with three smart red flashes on either side of its bonnet. It had streamlined headlamps let into its fender, and its wheels had rubber tires and chromium hub caps, though the hub caps could not be removed. I became very skilled at driving it, though perhaps I should not say such a thing, and could negotiate the narrowest gates and doorways without scraping its paint. I also learned to steer it in reverse and was able to turn it round in very small spaces.

I do not know why my father gave me such an expensive present, as we were a fairly poor family. I was an only child and lived in an end terrace house in a back street of the town in which I had been born. Both the terrace and the street in which it stood have been knocked down now for many years.

It was a small house, though as a child I was not conscious of this, but it had a long garden. I remember the garden particularly well. It was closed off on both its sides, partly by solid

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fencing and partly by trellis work fixed to stout posts. The fences and trellis were painted with creosote, which the summer sun bleached to a pleasant brown. At the bottom of the garden was a tall untidy hedge of hawthorn. The hedge had gaps in it low down, through which you could see allotments dotted with little sheds and pig pens made of corrugated iron. On a sunny day the allotments and the men working on them looked like little bright pictures seen through the stems and leaves.

The garden, though narrow, was further divided by two long paths made of some pinky-ashy stuff and edged by a grey-leaved creeper that grew star-shaped flowers in summer. Near the house was a little paved part my mother always called The Patio. Beyond The Patio was a rose plot, then another with Lane's Prince Albert apple trees, then the vegetable patch and some raspberry canes before you came to the cold frame and the compost heap. There was a little greenhouse too, built close up to the hedge so that one side of it always grew green spots on the glass no matter how often they were scraped away. The greenhouse had an iron rain-water butt. During the War my father put it outside in the street and wrote FIRE on it in big red letters, though we were never bombed.

I remember the garden so well because of a game I played there. All the paths had names I had invented, the long paths and the little ones that went between the plots, the hard, beaten patch by the compost heap, the turning place beside the cold frame. The borders had their roadways too, places that were not often dug and where my tires marks did not show, but only I knew what they were called. On summer afternoons when I did not have to shop with my mother I would sit on The Patio and plan my travels through the country I had invented. My choice of routes was wide. For instance, I could take the North Road or the South. The North Road, the first of the long pink paths, led to Foxglove Close or, if I traveled its full length, to Cold Frame Garage and the greenhouse. Behind the greenhouse were old bricks and rotted boxes, and a pair of great spoked wheels my father told me had once belonged to an airplane. The bindweed crawled over them before climbing up into the hedge. The road ended here. It was a dangerous place, frightening and a little dark. Or I could cross The Patio to the South Highway. Clumps of violets grew between the flags of The Patio, where the cracks were widest. I knew exactly the locks to apply to steer my wheels between them. From the Highway I could swing right into Mornington Crescent. The grass path in front of the raspberry canes curved a little, and it was here the sun came first in summer. I do not know where I had heard the name I chose for it, but it seemed right.

Wherever I traveled though, I would always end up in my favorite

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place of all. I called it Daisy Lane, from the big mauve clumps of Michaelmas daisies that grew close by each year. Here, by careful reversing, I could slide myself right out of sight between tall bushes. Once in position I could not be seen from the house at all, but *I* could see. I could stare down through the gaps in the hedge at the men working in the field, easing the car backward a little by the pressure of a pedal if one of them paused and seemed to glance my way. The sun struck hot on my face and arms, and the bushes broke the breeze. It was always still in Daisy Lane, and wasps would come and bite at the old wood of the fence posts, little beetles would run across the earth.

In winter or when the weather was bad I would oil the motor ready for fresh journeys, and polish its headlamp rims. Newspapers would be spread on the living room rug, and my father would turn the car on its side for me so I could reach the pedal bearings. I had been given a little oilcan, round, flat and with a long, thin spout, to have for my own. I kept it with my cleaning rags in a tin with an overlapping pattern in brown, gold and orange. The oil can had to be stored upright, or the oil would spill.

I do not know why I have begun to write down my thoughts, or why I should think first of my toy car, and the games I played when I was small.

It is very still today, with hardly any wind, and the Station is quiet. Recently a skylight ventilator has taken to rattling; several times it has woken me in the night. Yesterday I got the big ladder out and climbed up to it but I could not see what was wrong. I wonder if a strip of draft excluder would be a good idea. If I put it along the top of the frame by the catch it would stop the noise and also prevent rain getting in. At least it would do no harm. I am always careful about undertaking actual repairs, as I know I am not very good with my hands.

I did my first piece of writing last night. I have read through it and do not quite know what to think. I am not really sure what I am trying to do. I am certainly not writing my life story. Even if I was capable of such a thing, it would not be of any interest. Nor am I keeping a diary; I did the writing in an old ledger I found when I first cleaned my office out. So I suppose I must have started a hobby. I must be careful not to let it interfere with my work. I do not think I have ever had a hobby before.

The writing took a long while. Three hours, from locking the Stations until nearly midnight. I was amazed when I looked at my clock and saw how much time had passed. If I am to write regularly, I must rearrange my schedule so as to take more advantage of the light. I have a good supply of candles, but it seems a waste to burn them unnecessarily.

I read parts of what I had done several times. I was surprised at how

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much I had remembered about being small. I could never be a real writer of course, but I find I can put my thoughts down clearly and in the proper order. That will have to do instead.

I must spend this afternoon filling the water tank. It is a good tank and has been very useful, but filling it takes a long time. I found it behind what I think is an old factory on the far side of the car park. It was thrown out on a rubbish heap with a lot of used bricks. So it seemed quite all right to take it, though it was very hard work getting it to the Station. I was afraid to drag it in case I damaged it, but it was so heavy that carrying it took most of a day. It had a tap already fitted that I thought would be very useful, though when I got it back I realized it would have to be lifted up onto something before I could fill buckets from it. So I fetched some of the bricks and made them into two stacks for it to stand on. I was very pleased when I had finished, as it seemed to be quite firm. The night after I fixed the tank was the first time I saw the camp fires on the hills.

A stream runs past the Station, within a yard or two of it, but the banks are steep and slippery, and it is difficult to reach the water. For a time I did not know what to do; then I found something in a shed by the rubbish heap that I thought would help. It was like a little crane with a pulley and an arm and a sort of foot, a metal plate with holes at the corners for fixing. I do not know what it was for originally. There was some rope too. At first I did not like to borrow it, as I was afraid it would look like stealing, but there was nobody I could ask.

There is a bridge across the stream, where the cars used to come into the car park. I managed to fix the crane to its parapet with baling wire. The pulley was very stiff at first but it ran quite freely after I had oiled it. It was difficult for a time getting the bucket to fill. Instead of turning over and sinking, it would float, and the current would carry it off along the stream. I found after several trys that it was best to drop it the last little way with a bump and sort of jog it over onto its side. Of course I only have the plastic buckets that were supplied for use on the Station. I wonder if metal ones might work better.

I was very worried when the water went off. I did not bother so much about the electricity, as I had a box of candles in the office and have been able to get more since, but without water the Stations could not do their job properly. There was water in the small cisterns of course, but the big one my side used to flush automatically every twenty minutes, and without the sound of it the whole place seemed different. I got the ladder and filled it with a bucket. I found it would still work when the water reached the proper level. At first I filled it several times a day, but with nobody using the Station any more, that was not really necessary. But it is still done twice a

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day, last thing before I lock up and first thing in the morning.

I have been thinking some more about when I was small. I have been trying to remember the very last time I used the car, drove down the South Highway or into Mornington Crescent. There must have *been* a last time, but I cannot remember it. This seems strange. I found the car a long while later, when I was cleaning out the wash house after my mother died. It was very rusty; it needed a good clean up and a coat of paint. There were new people next-door, with young children. I asked them if they wanted it, but they said no. So I put it back where it was. It was hard to believe I had once been small enough to drive it. By that time most of my roads had gone anyway, as my mother had been ill for several years and I was never very good at gardening. It disappointed my father, as he had wanted me to be a gardener like himself.

I did not get on very well at school. Everybody said I was slow, though I was never sure just what they meant. One time when it was very bad I started trying to do all sorts of things, like eating and tying my shoelaces, quicker than usual to show I was not slow at all. My father visited the school several times. I met him once in the corridor; it seemed very strange to see him there. Afterwards the headmaster sent for me, from one of my classes. I was very frightened. He asked me a lot of questions about the sort of things I did at home. I could not answer him properly, as I did not know what he meant. It was a new school, built nearly outside the town, and his study was very new, with light-green walls. There was a cream-painted cupboard behind his desk. I knew that was where he kept his sticks. They were canes, really, but we called it "getting the stick." There were also tall glass doors with a flagged courtyard outside, like The Patio at home, only much tidier. He said he wanted to help me and that I was not to worry. I was very glad when he told me I could go.

After that they put me into a special class. They said it was to help my reading. We all sat round on funny-smelling straw mats with bright patterns on them and took it in turns to read aloud. I could read quite well although I was never very interested in books, but I could not answer questions. They confused me, I could never understand what I was supposed to say.

Afterwards the headmaster sent for me several more times and asked what I was doing at home to help my mother. I could never think of what to say to him either. He said he wanted to be my friend, but I never really liked him much.

I think not being able to remember the last time I drove my car is really odd. It has made me think of doing other things for the last time. I did read a story once about a man who was going to be shot for spying. Only they

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did not do it till the morning so that he could see his last sunset. But if you were going to be killed, there would be a lot of other things. Like the last time you cut your nails, or the very last time you ever combed your hair.

Things always seemed to get harder for me, not easier. After I left school my father got me a job at the council nurseries. I had to go and see a man called Mr. Sanderson. I thought I was going to like it at the beginning. It was not far to go, just the other side of the allotments. There were three big greenhouses about 30 yards long. I could see the roof of our house and the big hedge at the bottom of the garden; it looked quite different from the other side. But I did not do very well. I kept breaking plant pots; things were always going wrong. And there was a girl who worked in the office. She used to follow me about, try and get me on my own in one of the sheds. She made me afraid to go to work. Then she said a lot of things about what I had done to her. They were not true but everybody believed her. Afterwards I worked at the tip for a long time; then I was on the carts. I did not like that at all.

I was nearly 45 when I started at the Station. It had not been built very long then. I knew they wanted someone to look after it, but I did not think they would give the job to me. I had to see a man called Mr. Ireland. That was at the new Council offices. He asked me a lot of questions, it was nearly like being in the headmaster's study again. Then he said that I had worked for the Council a long time and that apart from one small incident I had a very good record. He said that he had known my father for many years and that he had been a good worker too. He made some notes and sat and thought for a minute; then he said he would let me know. He was very nice to me.

The letter came next day. It upset my mother very much. I was really happy; I could not understand why she was not pleased as well. She kept saying, "To think a son of mine should be a lavatory attendant." But I never thought of it as a lavatory. It was the Station almost from the start. I heard a lady say one afternoon, 'Thank God, a Comfort Station!' It pleased me very much, it seemed such a good name. I think she was an American.

There are two Stations really built on to each other, one for Ladies and one for Gentlemen. The Ladies side was looked after by someone called Mrs. Stevens. She was rather short and had horn-rimmed glasses and very yellow hair. On sunny afternoons she used to take a chair outside and sit by her door and knit. I used to say good morning to her but we never talked much. She did not seem very friendly.

I expect it will sound silly, but I think the Station is very beautiful. It stands to one side of the car park, very close to the stream. It is low and plain

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and built of a sort of fawn-colored brick, with narrow windows along the side that have muffled glass. Inside, all the tiles are white and the walls are a very light grey with more white on them in little splashes. It is always cool, even in summer. At the end farthest from the stream there is quite a large room with one door into the Station and another that opens outside. This is my room. It has a chair and table and a ring for boiling kettles, a sink and two big cupboards and quite a lot of shelves. There is even space for a bed, which is very fortunate.

I made a mistake about the room the first time Mr. Ireland came to the Station. I had been there nearly two weeks then. When I took over it was in a terrible mess, with cigarette butts ground out all over the floor and dirt everywhere. I scrubbed it out, using the disinfectant for the Station floor, and got everything tidy, and Mr. Ireland came to see what stores and equipment I had and what new things I would need. I said, "If you will come into the office, sir, I will show you," and he laughed. I felt myself going red at that, like I used to at school when I had said something stupid, but he put his hand on my shoulder. "That's all right," he said. "If you want it to be your office, that is what it will be." I do not know why, but I felt better almost at once.

The next time he came it was because I had written him a note. One of the channels was stained; it annoyed me, as the rest of the Station was spotless, but although I had scrubbed it with the disinfectant for a long time, it had not done any good. Also people kept writing things on the cubicle doors. Horrible things, sometimes. I had been rubbing them off with hot water and Vim, but the paint was wearing away as well in places and the doors were looking a sight. He brought me a can of special cleaner that worked very well, though he told me to be careful not to get it on my hands. He said he would get some special paint put on the doors. He even asked me what color I would like. I said I thought dark blue would look very nice, and he laughed. He said it was up to the architect really but he would see what he could do. I felt confused. Nobody had ever asked me a thing like that before.

I asked him if he would like a cup of tea. I do not know what made me say such a thing, as it was hardly my place. I was sure he would refuse and that I had made another mistake, but he said, "That would be very nice." I was a bit nervous, I gave him the cup with the big crack in it, I did not realize till afterwards. But he did not seem to mind. He sat in the office and smoked a cigarette. Then he said a most surprising thing. "You know, Tom," he said — he always called me Tom, right from the start — "if everybody on the Council was as conscientious as you, we'd have no call for complaint." I did not know what to say. I felt really em-

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barrassed, being praised like that. I had never realized there was anything I could do well.

After that I started coming down to the Station very early. It opened at half past eight in the summer, and I was supposed to be there an hour before, but I took to coming down at half past six. It gave me a chance to do a lot of extra cleaning jobs, like the door catches and the windows. It was a lovely time of day, with nobody about and the sun on all the buildings and the parked cars. There was mist on the stream sometimes, but the hills all round the town were very clear.

Sometimes I would stay on late as well, after the Station was closed. Then I would not want to go home at all. My mother had died by this time, and they had moved me out of the old house. They gave me a flat in a new building overlooking the Cathedral Close. It was very nice, there was a bedroom and a place where I could cook, but I did not like it. I was always happier at the Station.

I thought about it a long time; then I bought a little air bed. They had a sale of camping things at one of the big shops in the town center, that was what gave me the idea. After that I could sleep at the Station and get up and make my breakfast and start whenever I liked. Each morning I rolled the bed up carefully and put it away at the bottom of one of the cupboards. I did not tell Mr. Ireland. I did not think he would approve.

After he brought the cleaning stuff, he started calling in quite regularly, sometimes twice a week. He always had tea. He would sit and talk about his job and how hard it was to keep everything going with the money getting tighter all the time. One day he even brought some tea of his own; he said it was to replace all mine that he had drunk, though that did not matter. It was a very expensive brand, one I had never bought. I still have some of it left.

I do not know how to describe Mr. Ireland. He was about two inches taller than I am, with grey hair combed straight back and very bright blue eyes, but that is not enough. There were other things, and I cannot find the proper words for them. Nobody was ever as kind to me as he was.

I have been trying to remember how long it has been since anybody used the Station. The Trouble came at Easter, and it is nearly autumn now. So it must be at least five months, perhaps more.

I have fixed the skylight, though I do not know yet whether it has worked, as it has not been windy. Also, I looked out of the office window tonight before I lit the candle. There seemed to be a lot more fires than before, and some of them were closer.

I must stop now, as the candle is nearly out. I did not mean to go on for so long, but there was more to say about Mr. Ireland than I realized.

* * *

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I want to try to write something very difficult. I have started twice already and had to cross out what I had done. I think perhaps this is the first really hard thing I have tried to say.

There was a song we had to learn at school, about the Lordly Ones. Miss Chaston, who taught us music, said that meant the fairies. It was a strange song and puzzled me very much at first. It said they lived in the hollow hills but I thought the other children were singing "the Harlow hills" and that all fairies lived at a place called Harlow, wherever that might be. I often used to make mistakes like that.

I did not think about the song again for years. Then, when I was working on the dust carts there was a man called Smudger. I never knew his proper name. He was a big man, much bigger than I, and had a lot of friends. I used to go with him sometimes to a hotel near the town center to have a drink. I would never have dared go to such a place on my own. The public bar was up the yard, and to get to it you had to pass a room lit by candles where all the guests were eating their dinner. The first time I looked in I thought some of the ladies were the most beautiful I had ever seen, and for some reason I remembered the song at once. I knew they were not fairies of course, just very rich people, but afterwards whenever I went there, the song always started in my mind.

Then when I had my flat I used to sit quite a lot looking down over the cathedral wall at the grass and driveways inside, especially if there was a wedding there or some other big function, which often happened. The people who came were very grand. Some of them even wore top hats like in the films. So I thought they must be the Lordly Ones too. So, although I was always getting shouted at for being clumsy or in the way, I thought if I could get the job at the Station, some of them might come there and see the towels all clean and soap in the dispensers, and be pleased. I wonder if Mr. Ireland knew that, and that was why he set me on.

I have had an idea. There is some old lead piping on the rubbish heap where I found the water tank. If I could somehow fix a piece of it to the edge of one of the buckets, it would tip over automatically when it went into the water, and filling it would be a lot easier.

I cannot do very much tonight. I feel tired. I wonder if it is the writing and having to think so hard to find the proper words.

It worked! I went over to the factory first thing this morning, as soon as it was light, and brought the pipe back. I cut a piece off, using a saw that was in one of the cupboards in the office, and knocked it flat with a hammer. Then I bent it round the edge of one of the buckets and hammered it again till it was tight. After that I did not have to

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jiggle the bucket about each time to make it sink, and filling the tank took a whole half-hour less!

After I had finished I went and sat on the bank of the stream for a time because I was still feeling shaky from having had to use the saw. I do not like saws. I was playing with one once when I was small, and it slipped. I remember looking down and seeing all the white bone. I could not feel anything at first, and so I thought I had not hurt myself very much; then the blood all came in a big red spurt. I think everybody in the street came out to see when I was taken to the hospital. My mother kept shouting, "I told him not to touch the saw! I told him not to touch the saw!" I do not think I was so frightened of the blood as of being shouted at again if the saw had slipped. It made me feel really sick. But it had not slipped, I had not had an accident at all, and after a time the sickness went away.

It is a very beautiful stream. There are notices on the bridge saying it is the River Avon, and so I suppose it must be, but it always looks like a stream to me. Under the bridge the water is quite deep, but by the Station there is a shallower part where there are great masses of starwort. The underwater leaves are long and thin like hair, but those on top spread out like little light-green roses. There is duckweed too. In the very shallowest parts the leaves throw their shadows onto the bottom, each with a little bright rim. Hart's-tongue ferns grow on the banks. Their leaves are bright green and wavy, and the tips of the longest nearly touch the water. There are small trees too, mostly alder. When I first went to the Station I bought a book on plants and can now identify nearly all of them.

I was always afraid they would do something to the stream, dredge it or culvert it. I remember when they cut the hedge behind the old house. It was only waist high when they had finished, all the branches woven in and out like a fence, and the dark places underneath it had gone. Everything looked different; it did not seem possible there had ever been that great mound of leaves.

I used to sit by the stream a lot, early in the morning and in the evening when the Stations had closed. I was there when the Trouble started. It was a fine evening. It was a Sunday, so there were not many cars in the park. I did not understand what was happening at first. There was some shouting, and bangs and rattlings like a lot of cars all backfiring at once. I only realized later it was shooting.

By that time I was sleeping at the Station nearly every night. I had bought a little gas cooker, as I was afraid to use too much electricity, and I had a saucepan and some cans of soup. When I heard the shooting I was very frightened. I could not think what to do. In the end I decided to stay in the office and wait. I locked the doors and went to bed. Some people came in the

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night and took the rest of the cars away, but they did not come near the Station.

The noise went on all next day and most of the next. The third morning was very quiet, and there was no electricity.

Two days later the water stopped running. I knew I must do something then, as it had to be reported. Also I was very hungry, having used up all my soup. There was a telephone booth in the main street, at the top of the little lane that leads to the car park. I made sure I had some twopenny pieces and walked up to it. My throat felt rather dry as I do not like using telephones.

The main street was empty. There were some cars parked, one with its doors standing open, but nobody was moving about. Also there was a big cloud of smoke coming from somewhere behind the cathedral. It was all very odd.

I rang the offices. I had the number in my pocket book. I was going to ask to speak to Mr. Ireland, but the telephone did not answer. It did not even make those little clicks and buzzes you usually hear. I read the instructions to make sure I was doing it right and tried again. But nobody spoke.

After I had tried several more times, I went back to the office. It was a sunny morning, quite warm for the time of the year. I made some tea. I had to drink it without anything, as I had run out of both sugar and milk. I did not know what to do. I had been relying on speaking to Mr. Ireland.

It was afternoon by the time I had decided. I walked round to the offices. The doors were all closed. I banged on them but nobody came. I felt more confused than ever and went on toward the town center. I had not gone very far when I saw a body. I mean a dead person. He was lying on the path with his arms spread out and there were dark brown splashes all round his head. I had not seen anything like that before.

I kept on walking but I soon saw some more. One was a lady. She had some shopping with her, and it had all spilled out across the path. Something, cats, I expect, or perhaps birds, had been scratching at it so that all the cartons were spoiled. I did not go very close.

There were a lot more bodies in the town center, and more cars, one with its windshield smashed. The bodies were mostly on the pavements. So I walked in the road. I kept looking round. I was expecting somebody to shout at me to ask what I was doing. It took me a long time to realize that there was nobody left.

On the way back I passed the supermarket where I used to do my shopping. Its doors were standing open and one of its windows had been broken. I went inside. I was not hungry any more after what I had seen, but I knew I had to get more food. I took a basket and went round

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some of the shelves. They were all still full. I took some corned beef and some cans of fruit salad, which I have always liked. I knew it was no use taking the bread, as it would have gone stale, but I found some things called oat cakes that were just as good. When I had filled the basket I went back to one of the checkouts. I did not know how much I had taken and am not very good with figures. So I left a 5 pound note in the clip on the front of the till. I hoped that would be enough.

I went back again when the food was gone. It was horrible. There were big crows flapping about in the streets, and the whole town was starting to smell. I knew I had to have a lot of food this time, as it might be a long while before anyone came back. So I took a shopping cart. I tried to add it all up, but I kept getting different amounts. In the end I just walked away. I knew that was stealing, but I was very hungry, and somehow it did not seem to matter any more.

I do not know why the Trouble happened. There was a lot on the telly about the black people fighting the whites and the unions trying to take over, but I could never understand it. I do not know why black people and white people should fight. I knew a black man once when I was on the carts. He was a very quiet person and used to bring small fruit pies to work that his wife had made. He shared them with me sometimes. They were very nice.

I have done more than I intended to again; the ledger is starting to look quite full. But it seems when I think of one thing, it makes me think of others, and then they have to be put down as well.

I am glad I have written about what it was like in the town. I do not feel quite so worried now, though I do not know why that should be.

I had a bad dream last night. It was very frightening. At least I think it was a dream. It certainly started out as one.

When it began I was sitting by the back door of the old house in my car. I remember it very clearly. There was a patch of dark-blue shiny bricks and a strip of earth to one side with ferns in it and a big flaky seashell the size of a football. The outhouse door was painted dull green and had a horseshoe nailed to it. I never liked to get too close to the outhouse, as there was something inside it that frightened me. I found out later it was an old washing dolly, but in the half-light it always looked like an animal, with a long neck and big sticking-out ears. In the dream I knew it was going to come out and get me, but I could not move. My mother was knocking on the living room window and shouting something, but it was as if the pedals of the car were frozen solid.

Then I do not know how it happened, but I had moved and was rushing across The Patio very fast. Only the garden was not as I remembered it;

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there was a great hill beyond that kept getting steeper and steeper. The pedals started going quicker and quicker; then just as I was going to crash, there was a great shout of "Whoa, back!" It woke me and I sat up. I was sweating quite a lot. I was frightened because the shout had been right too. I mean, something I remembered. The house I used to live in was on a little slope, and there was one Co-Op man who never used to set the handbrake on his wagon, and that was how he would shout at the horse when it kept walking on. The noise still seemed to be echoing, though why he should come back and shout in my office again after so long, I could not understand.

I lit a candle, but there was nothing there. Then I thought the sound might have come from one of the Stations, my side or the Ladies. So I got the keys and a flashlight and unlocked them. But everything was all right. It was a beautiful night with a full moon. The hills showed clearly, and I could hear the stream running in the dark.

I did not go into the other Station till nearly a month after the Trouble. Mrs. Stevens did not come again, though with all that had happened I hardly expected her to. So while my side was still opened and closed at the proper times, hers stayed shut. Then one morning, I do not know why, I tried my outside key in the other lock. I did not think it would fit. But it did, and the door opened.

I was very startled by that. For a moment I did not know what to do. Then I put my head inside. Naturally I had never been in before. It was just like my side, the same light-grey walls, the same basins and roller towels and white tiles. It smelled a little musty though, from having been shut up so long.

I went farther in. I was worried that I was doing wrong, but very curious. There were no channels, naturally, just the cubicles, but everything else was just the same, with a door at the back to another little office. It was open, so I went in. It was the same as mine, only not so tidy. There was a raincoat on a hanger and a corner cupboard and a table with some keys on it. I took them and put them on my own ring. I was not worried any more, as I had come to a decision. Since nobody was looking after the other Station, it was clearly my duty to take it over myself. This time I was sure Mr. Ireland would agree. I went back and stood in the main part again by the cubicles. It still seemed a little strange, everything the same as my side, only the wrong way round. But I soon got used to it.

My first job was to clean out the office, which was really in rather a mess. I tidied all the stores I could find and washed the floor and stood the doors open for it to dry. Then I started on the rest. I cleaned the pedestals, flushed all the cisterns and refilled them by hand. There was a dispenser on the wall that I did not like to touch at first, but finally I unlocked it. I did not know what I

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would see inside, but it was quite all right, just a stack of little white cartons. I had found some while I was tidying the office and had not known what they were. I filled the machine right up and checked that it was working properly. Then I started on the floor. A lot of dust and stuff had blown in under the door. I swept it out and gave the Station a good scrub through. Then I got the ladder and cleaned the windows, inside and out. It was a hard day's work, but when it was finished I was very pleased with myself.

Next morning I went back to the town. I had realized while I was doing the cleaning that the other office would make a useful store room, and since my food was running low, I had better get a really good supply. The streets did not smell quite as much as they had, though in the supermarket it was worse. All the food in the refrigerators had gone bad, and there were rats scuttling about. They had even chewed the labels on a lot of the cans. So it seemed I was only just in time. I spent a long while going forward and back with the cart. When I had finished, the office was really full. Then I went looking for other things that would be useful, like spare gas cylinders for the cooker. It was easy, as nearly all the shops had been left open. I had got quite used to taking what I wanted by this time; it hardly seemed like stealing any more. After all nobody else wanted it. Then I went to my flat. I had some more canned soup there. I took it all and some clothes and blankets.

Nearly the last thing I did was go to the cathedral. I had wanted to see inside it ever since I could remember, but I had never dared, and now seemed as good a chance as any. When I got up close I realized how big it really was, with the spire going up and up in the sunlight and all the windows staring down. It made me feel quite giddy. I half expected it to be locked up but it was open too. There was a big door at the side, standing ajar. I went through and there was another door with a huge iron handle. I turned it and pushed and it opened a little way. The air inside smelled funny, very musty and cold. There were great tall columns like trees and a big window with the light all pouring through. But I could not go in. I stood on the step a long time, but in the end I had to walk away. It frightened me. Places like that are for the Lordly Ones, not the likes of me.

I spent this afternoon sitting by the stream again. The doors of both Stations were open, ready for anybody who might come, and there was nothing else to do. It was a warm afternoon and very still, the sort of day you often get in September. The hills looked yellow in the sunlight, and some smoke was going up a long way off. It was really quiet, but from time to time there was a sort of dull booming, like guns being fired miles away.

I supposed it will sound funny, but

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I felt at peace. I have been feeling like that a lot since everybody went away. I cannot really find the right words to describe it.

When I wake up in the mornings, the sun makes a patch low down on the wall by my head, always in the same place. Birds are singing in the trees by the stream, and I know if I go to the window the sun will be on the brick wall round the car park, and the hills. As it moves round through the day, all the shadows change until they point the other way. Sometimes, if there is a wind, the dust blows across the car park in little whirls. When I lock the doors last thing at night, the moon is coming up. The moon makes shadows too of course, and they change as well, as it goes across the sky. The moonlight makes the car park look nearly white, but the shadows by the stream are black, like velvet. At night it always seems you can smell the water more clearly. The mist usually comes when it is starting to get light. It makes long streaks that reach as high as the bridge parapet. Nothing else happens. I do not *want* anything else to happen, ever again.

Being on my own was strange at first, but I soon got used to it. I was sorry for a while that I would not see Mr. Ireland again, but I do not think he will come now. I do not think anybody will come.

I have had an odd thought. I think I enjoyed the garden so much when I was small because I could be on my own there. Nobody knew about the secret places except me. I wonder if perhaps that is what I have always wanted. Just to be alone and not have people always telling me off. Perhaps that is why I wrote so much about the garden and my pedal car.

The tune about the Lordly Ones has been in my head again all day. There must be a reason for it. I wonder if they are the only people left, if they own everything now. I think it is their fires I can see on the hills.

If they do come, the Stations will be ready. They will see that I have been doing my job.

The water is running again!

It woke me in the night. At first I did not understand; then I could not believe it. The pipes were knocking and banging all round; then I heard the big cistern flush, and the hissing as it started to fill again. I got up and went outside. I still could not believe it, but it was true.

I unlocked the Stations and went in with my flashlight. I was afraid of something overflowing or getting blocked. But everything was working perfectly. I flushed all the cisterns, both sides, again and again; and as fast as I flushed them, they filled back up! It was like a miracle.

I could not go back to sleep. I made some tea instead. As it was a celebration, I used the special packet Mr. Ireland brought. I even opened some

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canned milk I was keeping for a special occasion.

I cannot write any more just now. It is getting light already and I have a lot to do. Both Stations must be cleaned right through, from top to bottom. I expect somebody will be round from the offices soon, to see how I have been getting on.

I have made another decision. When Mr. Ireland comes, I am going to show him what I have written. I expect some of it is silly but I know he will not laugh. I would not show it to anybody else. Nobody in the whole world.

I cannot understand what is happening. The water is still on and the electricity came back this afternoon. I kept trying the switches just in case. But nobody has been to the Stations.

I worked all day. I did everything, the tiles and channels, the pedestals, the downpipes, the windows and floors. I wanted it all to be looking its very best. But nobody came.

I kept telling myself they would be very busy; they would have a lot more important people to see than I. But when it got to evening, I started getting anxious again and went up to the telephone booth. It was just the same as last time though; the telephone would not answer however much I tried. So I went round to the offices. They were still shut, and big drifts of paper and rubbish had blown up against the doors. So nobody had been there after all.

It was getting late when I came back, and I noticed something else. All the hills were dark, there were no fires showing anywhere. So the Lordly Ones have gone away as well.

I do not know what to think. I want to see Mr. Ireland again, of course, but I am getting worried now about all the food still in Mrs. Stevens' office. I had to have food if I was going to keep on doing my job, but I am afraid if he does come now, he will think I took too much. But I did not know how long I would have to be here, and it was only spoiling anyway. I did not take anything that was not necessary. I even returned the cart when I had finished with it; I can show him where I left it. And he will see the water tank and the crane and know I did the best I could.

There have been noises in the town for hours now. Queer noises. It sounds like the shooting again. But that surely cannot be right. It is all over.

I am going to leave the lights on in the Stations tonight, and the doors unlocked. I know it is against the rules, but if there are people about again, someone might need them.

I think maybe the Lordly Ones came down from the hills and turned the water on for me. I suppose I am really hoping they will come here. I wonder what they will be like. Beautiful of course, as it says in the song. I wonder if they will be black.

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They have been to the Station!

It was sometime during the night, I do not know when. After I had finished writing I put the office light out and lay down on the bed. I felt very tired but I did not think I would sleep. I must have done though, because when I opened my eyes again it was early morning.

I got up at once and went outside. The mist was still hanging over the brook; the trees looked quite ghostly with it floating round their trunks. The first thing I noticed was something lying on the car park. It was a piece of cloth, all covered with blood. There was some more near the Station door. I went inside and had a nasty shock. There was blood everywhere, on the basins, on the floor and splashed down one of the walls. So they must have been badly hurt. If only they had called me! I have bandages in the office, proper bandages. I brought them back when I fetched the spare gas cylinders. I could have *helped*.

I got started right away cleaning the mess up. I got it off the floor and the basins easily enough, but it would not come off the wall; it still left stains however much I rubbed. I wish it had not gone on the wall, but I do not suppose they could help it.

There has been shooting in the town all day. It is still going on. And there must be a big fire somewhere close because clouds of smoke keep blowing across the car park. The sunlight coming through it makes it a funny ginger color. Sometimes I can hardly see the far wall, and the hills are quite blotted out. I was going to try and get to the offices again, but I did not dare. I wish I knew what was going on.

I had a sleep this afternoon. It was only a short nap but I had a very strange dream. It was as if I was standing a long way off looking at the Station. It was all on its own in fields, no buildings near at all, just the big green hills all round. It is still very clear in my mind. I wish I could draw a picture of it just as I saw it. But I was always very bad at drawing, even at school.

I wish that was how it could be. Just the Station on its own, miles away from anywhere, and me to look after it. I could have a stove for the winter, and curtains I could draw. And I could get up every day and polish the copper pipe under the cistern and do the channels, and the people would come and go from the hills, and I could see them. And nothing would change forever; there would be no more worries at all.

They are here again!

I do not know what the time is. It is still dark. I have lighted a candle to write this, as somehow I did not want to turn the electricity on. I am very nervous, though I am sure there is no need.

Although it is still night, I can see the car park. There is an orange, flickery light like the light from a bonfire, and I can still smell smoke. It must

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be coming from the burning building.

They are all round the Station. I can hear their feet scuffling and their voices, but I cannot make out what they are saying.

It is silly to be nervous. After all, I am not important, they are not interested in me. But if they really are the Lordly Ones, come down from the hills, I am not sure after all that I want to see them.

They are calling something. It sounds like, "Come out, wherever you are." That is very strange. They surely cannot mean me.

There is something else now. They are all shouting it together. "Dan, Dan, the shithouse man." But that is not right. This is a Comfort Station, and I am its attendant.

This is terrible! They are shooting, at the Station! I can hear the glass going in the windows. They must not do that! It is special glass, I cannot replace it!

There must have been a mistake. They think there is someone else here, someone they do not like. I will go out to them, I should have gone before. I shall blow the candle out first, then open the door. When they see me it will be all right.

I have had a silly thought, the silliest of all. I would like my little car back again now. I always felt safe in it; I could pedal it through the door and they would laugh. They would see I was only a little child after all.

I am putting the light out now.

Coming soon

Next month: "Dangerous Games," deep-space sf adventure from **Marta Randall;** "The Way Station," gripping fantasy from **Stephen King.** And soon: new stories from **Glen Cook, John Brunner, Lisa Tuttle, Walter Tevis, Thomas Disch, Bob Leman, Stephen Tall** and many others.

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Letters

Michael Shea's "Angel..."

I have just finished reading Michael Shea's "The Angel of Death" in your August issue. It is a marvellous story — all the more so because the materials, at first glance, seem so very unpromising. The writing is at times amazingly daring. (Englemann's journal entries may deserve some stronger word — audacious, perhaps.) What I particularly liked is that, despite the subject and its temptations to sordidness and callousness, there is no brutality in the story but, rather, a kind of sweetness. I congratulate you on its acquisition and I look forward to following Michael Shea's future career.

—Arthur Jean Cox

We have in inventory a remarkable new story from Michael Shea titled "The Autopsy." It is an sf-horror story along the lines of "Angel of Death," but much stronger stuff. It may be the most intense and grim sf story we have ever read. *—ELF*

30th Anniversary Issue

The first thing I noticed, with the ad in *Locus*, even before the issue was published, was that Leiber was missing. I cried a long time about that. When I stopped crying, the October 30th Anniversary issue was on the stands. I bought it. Then I noticed that Bradbury wasn't there. I cried a long time again. When I finished crying the second time, I started reading.

Congratulations! You succeeded!

I suppose you, most of all, did some weeping over those writers and stories that wouldn't be included. Your editorial preface to the issue made it understandably clear why some were not there. And though I suppose there will be those of us who will always think you could have had *this* story instead of *that* story, well, *too*bad for us. You had a hell of a job, and you did it well. Can't thank you enough.

Can ask one question, a complicated one, though. Hope you won't mind answering. It rises from your editorial. What authors have most often published fiction in F&SF, and how many stories each have they published?

Thanks again for the Thirtieth October issue of the best fiction magazine published.

—James Tucker

If we omit non-fiction and verse, the writers with the most stories published in F&SF are: Avram Davidson, 45; Poul Anderson, 44; Ron Goulart, 43; Robert F. Young, 38; Miriam Allen deFord, 31; Zenna Henderson, 30; Fritz Leiber, 29 and Gordon R. Dickson, 29. *—ELF*

For many years most of my fan letters have been sent by telepathy, the only way that time could be found to accomodate them. I felt that I should make an exception in the case of your 30th Anniversary Issue which I have just gone through carefully before filing it with the complete set of your magazine on my shelves. I still remember where I bought the first issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy*, dated Fall,

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1949 and priced at 35 cents (a stiff price for a 128-paged digest-sized magazine with no interior illustrations in those days).

I got off on the wrong foot with the original editor, Anthony Boucher, when reviewing the magazine in *Fantasy Commentator* for Winter 1949-50, after first acknowledging the editors' virtues: "Their literary judgement is very good: they know a good story when they see it and they understand craftsmanship. They are seasoned editors, experienced at balancing a publication properly and presenting their material suitably," but I also said: "Boucher and McComas have a fair knowledge of fantasy in a generalized fashion, but withal one staggeringly inadequate to the task of selecting the best little-known stories from the past." I also said they would have to downplay fantasy and supernatural and give more stress to science fiction (which they discovered all by themselves), but Tony was furious at my comment regarding his inadequate background to select reprints. I first met him at the San Francisco hospitality suite at the Tenth Anniversary World Science-Fiction Convention in Chicago August 30, 1952. I had just gotten through a ten-minute monolog to Philip Jose Farmer, giving him all the reasons why his novel "The Lovers" (which had appeared only a few months earlier) was the greatest thing since the discovery of vanilla ice cream, and he was polite enough not to interrupt me. Boucher was standing alongside taking it all in and nodding his head as though in agreement. He was in his shirt sleeves, a glass with brown liquid in his hand. Suddenly he spotted my name tag. His eyes popped behind his round glasses. His cheeks became puffed and scarlet: "How *dare* you!" he almost shrieked, "Say that my judgement is staggeringly inadequate to the task of selecting the best little-known stories from the past? What qualifies you to make a statement like that!" I was saved by William Lawrence Hamling, then editing *Imagination* out of Chicago. "Les needs you right away, it's an emergency!" he said pulling me along with him. "Les" Cole was bidding for the next convention in San Francisco and was the host of the party.

The years passed, and being on Tony's hypothetical "S" list was something I felt I would have to live with. Though I had sold science fiction professionally to *Planet Stories* and *Comet* as far back as 1940, after World War II I decided I would take a regular full-time job, let the other writers get wealthy at writing science fiction, and engage in it as a hobby, contributing a good deal of what I wrote free of charge to fan magazines and putting an extraordinary amount of research, time and money into it. By the year 1956 I was fed up with fan magazines. Teen-age editors rewrote and cut material at will (sometimes inserting libelous remarks where none had previously existed), edited grammatical errors into my material and worst of all, often held material five years or more without publishing it. In 1956 I had written an article titled "The Genealogy of the Term Science Fiction," which was as long as a good-sized short story. I was almost ready to ship it off to a fan magazine, when the September, 1956 issue of F&SF appeared with an article by Robert Bloch titled "Some of my Best Fans Are Friends."

"Hell," I said. "If they are publishing articles on fans, they might

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be receptive to one on science fiction. Maybe time has mellowed Boucher and he has forgiven my critique of seven years past." So I mailed it off on July 26, 1956, with a self addressed return envelope with first-class postage. Six days later the bulky manuscript was returned *air mail!* This was the perfect squelch. Boucher was so eager to get rid of the thing that he added his own postage to slap it back at me faster. I didn't open the thing for three days. There certainly wasn't any rush to determine what type of insult a man ingenious enough to return a manuscript by air mail had prepared for me. When I finally opened it I read; "I think you've done a hell of a fine job in "The Genealogy of the Term Science Fiction" and I think we can use it." He had airmailed it because he wanted a few changes made and the manuscript rushed back. It was published as "How Science Fiction Got Its Name," in the February, 1957 F&SF, and for the next 10 years I stayed away from the fan magazines and sent my material to the professional magazines. I then collected them into books and finally began writing for book publication first. However, this all leads up to the fact that I can look back on that experience as one that very successfully changed my direction in a very positive manner.

All these years, F&SF has never lagged in maintaining its commendably high standards, despite financial limitations and many temptations to change radically. I think that it can honestly be said that there is no period of the magazine's history that can, in perspective, be termed "The Golden Age." I think the average quality of the magazine now is higher than it has ever been. I'd like to see you go another 30 years and would like to be around to see it and still have enough of my marbles left to understand what it is all about.

—Sam Moskowitz

I have just received my copy of your 30th anniversary issue and am reading it with avid, rabid, rampant delight. A marvelous selection. I am having fun reacquainting myself with old favorites and discovering some new ones. Only wish you'd have room for even more goodies but, then, I'm greedy. Especially love the Gahan Wilson drawings — you picked gems that had me chuckling down to my poor hepatitis-ridden liver (yes, your magazine certainly arrived at the right time, bringing mirth & sunshine to a feeble invalid — oh, the maudlin joy of it all!...)

One little point I must bring to your attention. You may think I am picking nits in your bed of roses but I feel it my duty to thus raise your consciousness and, perhaps, contribute in some small way, towards elevating your soul towards even loftier heights than it has thus far attained in this fleeting moment of mortality — or, to put it simply, do your karma a little good. Here it is, my nit: In your introduction to Shirley Jackson's story, you refer to her as having been "an amateur witch." Ain't no such animal, Mr. Ferman! Being a witch isn't a profession like being an engineer, a plumber or even an editor — it is a practice, a discipline — a religion, in its purest sense. If one functions as a witch in some capacity they may be a novice but not an amateur. That would be like claiming to be a part-time nun or an amateur Jew!

I don't claim to know to what ex-

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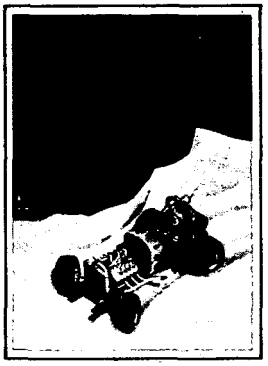

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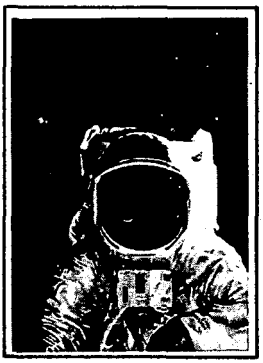

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(from page 159)

tent Ms. Jackson practiced witchcraft, nor do I claim to be a practicing witch myself but I like seeing accuracy, especially in such a fine publication as yours, one that is most definitely not amateur. Therefore, having aired my gripe in this brief letter, I will collect my nits and say thanks for a marvelous issue and happy 30th!

—Joy A. Schulenburg

Sorry. We picked that information up from Tuck's Encyclopedia of SF and Fantasy, *which went on to say that Ms. Jackson specialized in "small-scale magic." But she who carries a small broom is not necessarily an amateur.*

—ELF

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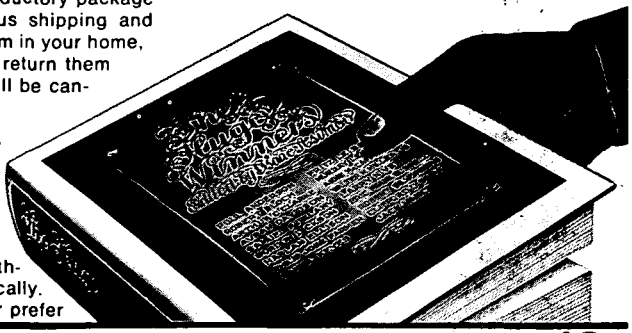

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